

**The text of the presentation made on 15 and 16 March**

Bishop Peter became our pastor in 2005. After 18 months of visiting the various parts of the diocese, he explained his vision for the three counties and urban centres in his care through his Pastoral Plan – Walking Humbly with our God.

That programme has been unfolding through the work of the 13 local Pastoral Areas ever since. Each autumn Bishop Peter has visited these groups to review their progress, and to help them steer their course ahead. He is always very clear about two things. His concern for the care of his brother priests, and our need to be thriving Catholic communities in our local areas.

During his visits in the autumn of last year, he announced how he sees the years ahead unfolding and the implications for each area. His Advent letter and a sermon on the sixth anniversary of his original vision address made his points more widely available to the diocese.

It is about how his announcement may affect us locally that I am talking to you – on behalf of the whole parish management group. I am going to paint a picture of a possible future that we may well face in this area, and how we might all work together as the situation evolves in the next 5 years.

When he spoke he was able to talk about the way in which the diocese and its people were well served by 72 priests. These include diocesan priests and ones from religious orders, like the three Vincentians who look after Dunstable, which is part of our pastoral area.

Since he addressed us, the scene has already changed. Sadly, we lost Fr. Joe Williams and Fr. Brendan Gorman who passed away in December. One of three priests planning to retire this year has already announced the date he will step down. Other elderly priests – most well into their late 70s – are also planning to relinquish active parish ministry this year.

This has already made the number serving us all in the diocese 67!

The news is never very good for Bishop Peter, as two of the other younger priests in the diocese recently suffered a heart attack!

We are blessed in this parish in that we have Fr. Denis as our resident parish priest. He is able to serve us celebrating regular Masses, through his work visiting, working in our community and being our local pastor. I hope that my contribution assists him and helps you in many ways, too.

It is fair to say that over the years we Catholics have come to rely too much on their local priest. We have lost many of our traditional ways of worshipping outside the Mass, and our occasions to gather for prayer and devotion has waned.

We also have mislaid some of our understanding of the Catholic teaching and the knowledge of our faith. There is no fault attached to this falling away – but there is a sense of loss and emptiness that many of us feel about this decline.

We cannot expect that things will go on like this for much longer!

In those autumn visits, Bishop Peter told the lay people and clergy who make up the pastoral area councils, what he feels would happen to the effective numbers of priest serving the diocese in the years ahead, and the likely effect of that for each area.

Bishop Peter described how each priest now cares, on average, for 450 parishioners. This relationship is very positive for us in the UK, where we are second only to Malta in the ratio of priests to lay people. It is for this and other reasons that it is totally inappropriate to expect priests from other countries and continents to get us out of our predicament.

Across the diocese, those priests regularly celebrate around 250 Sunday Masses, in nearly 100 churches and Mass centres.

In the diocese to have 35 deacons assisting their communities. Deacons do not replace priests, as they cannot celebrate Mass, though they do have much to offer at a parish level.

Looking ahead Bishop Peter expects priests retiring at age 75, over the next few years, to reduce the number of active men serving the diocese to fall to 36 in ten years time.

With four men in training for the priesthood, Bishop Peter's projection is that between 35 and 40 priests will be able to assist the Bishop in 2023 – assuming there is no other loss due to ill health.

Each priest will then be serving nearly 700 parishioners; this is ratio that harks back to the situation many of our parents and grandparents would have lived with in the 1950s and 1960s.

In time there will be some places without a resident priest, so 120 Masses will be celebrated on Sunday in around 40 parishes and 30 other churches. That will be less than half the current Masses in only 69 locations compared with 100 today. Bishop Peter has instructed that Sunday Masses are not replaced by services of Word and Communion – as we have here mid-week – unless in extreme situations.

There will be more deacons in the diocese by this date.

All of this represents a significant challenge to the Church in our diocese. Yet it is a situation that Catholic people have adapted to in many areas of the UK, in other Christian churches and in countries across the world.

You are surely wondering what this might that mean for us gathered here today - for me and my family ... for the growth in faith of my children and myself?

Our local pastoral area is dedicated to Francis of Assisi. It has seven full-time priests serving the communities that cover the area that matches the Central Beds Council area.

From Biggleswade in the east to Leighton Buzzard in the west there are eight parishes and mass centres. Two Catholic primary schools are located in the largest parish at Dunstable. There is one religious sister based in Shefford and in two years there will be four deacons assisting across our area.

Bishop Peter told us that by 2023 at the latest we will have just three priests to serve our local needs. A position which assumes that at some point the Vincentians, who have served Dunstable since as far back as the 1930s, may well have had to retire.

This has long been emerging as a self-evident situation for us to live with, and our local 'groundplan' developed as part of the Walking Humbly process has always envisaged this long-term outlook.

Bishop Peter has now determined that we all need to recognise and accept this future and work together to remain strong, thriving and responsible Catholic communities.

So what could this new situation mean for us:

... the likelihood is that there will be just one priest serving a much larger parish covering Flitwick, Shefford and Biggleswade. Given that responsibility the priest would be able to celebrate only one Mass on Saturday or Sunday for each community.

He will be responsible for a combined Catholic community of around 660 people, which represents the total Mass-going congregation of those three communities.

It is highly likely that the priest might chose to live centrally in this new parish, and so we may not have a resident priest here in our priest's house.

Practical considerations might mean we would have fewer weekday Masses, and that we would have to develop a new arrangement for Masses on Holy Days, Christmas and Easter, FHC and Confirmation.

The impact on you and I will that we will have to become more responsible for our own faith, its practice and its growth, for we can no longer rely on a resident priest to do things for us!

The areas where we may find we are accepting more responsibility as individuals and as a parish may include, for example

The way we look after our church and its environment

We will also need to recognise that this new future will have to be adequately financed and resourced in order to serve our needs.

We will have to work with our priests and the other communities in Shefford and Biggleswade to organise a fair and workable timetable for all of our Masses and the sacraments. We can then explore the ways in which we can gather for worship and pray both with a priest and a locally without the need for the priest.

We will have to get involved in understanding our faith and all it means for us, and take an enthusiastic part in the types of activities this parish already stages and some more! If we are parents, we will need to be even more active in the teaching of our children in the faith.

We already do so much in our parish to care for people in need and who are sick, old and vulnerable. A key sign of us as a thriving catholic community will be our willingness to shoulder more of this task as well as reaching out to the local community as a whole.

When I began I explained how I am addressing you today as a representative of the parish management group, the PMG. We are blessed to have a strong and effective parish group helping Fr. Denis to run and develop the parish. We also have one of the most effective pastoral area councils (PAC) in the diocese, acknowledged by Bishop Peter.

The PMG felt that it was long past the time to say something to you the community about the situation I have outlined here. And that the time was right to begin to plan for a new future.

The PMG has therefore commissioned a small working group that has the brief to do the following

To keep you the people of the parish informed about how things are developing, to talk to you and listen to your concerns and ideas for how we might meet this new situation and prosper.

This working group will aim to facilitate reflection and conversation with you in your parish groups of interest, and to act as the conduit to work with our sister communities through and outside the PAC

We also want to encourage a deeper culture of prayer and reflection to enable us all not only to pray for guidance and to discern the way forward in a mature, Christian and spiritual way.

This small group, after gathering ideas and suggestions will offer back to the PMG and you the people, practical ideas and plans for developing us an effective and thriving community in Flitwick, Ampthill and its surrounding areas.

For each of us today we can plan to take action.

First, make sure you take one of our prayer cards with you today. Please say the prayer regularly.

Look on the reverse and ponder the three important questions that will help you to play an active part in the response to this new situation. This presentation will be available through the parish website in the next day or so.

Do more than plan to come along to the three open sessions which we will be holding in the next few weeks – make a commitment to join us. We can only hear your thoughts if you take the opportunity to join in. Standing on the touchline expecting others to mind-read your concerns is a way of working that we need to leave behind!

We also need to take up Bishop Peter's call for us all to see this future as more than a challenge, recognising it as a chance to grasp and live out an authentic and powerful Catholic life!

