

THE SOCIETY AND FORWARD IN FAITH

Address at the 2016 National Assembly
by Dr Colin Podmore, Director of Forward in Faith

A catholic Christian needs to be part of a local church that is led by a bishop with whom he or she is in full communion. In their statements on catholicity and communion, and the leaflet that goes with them, our bishops have reminded us that all the baptized are part of the communion of saints – the fellowship of all the holy ones of God. In that sense we are in communion with all bishops of the Church of England. But *full* communion with a bishop involves being able to receive the sacramental ministry of all whom he ordains, so we are not in *full* communion with those who ordain women as priests. Recognizing this, the Church of England has enabled parishes to be placed under a bishop with whom all in the parish will be in full communion.

So far, so good. But how are that bishop's parishes linked with the parishes of other catholic bishops? First and foremost, through the bishop and the full communion that he shares with his fellow bishops. But the catholic bishops formed The Society to make those links more visible and more structural, to link what I call the 'full resolution' parishes across the Church of England in a visible structure. Parishes are invited to affiliate to The Society and, so to speak, 'fly the flag' of this family, this fellowship, this communion. They receive a 'porch card'. It explains how we seek to grow in holiness, how we are committed to proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord, and what The Society does, and then it proclaims, 'This parish is affiliated to The Society'.

On the Society website (www.sswsh.com) is a map which shows all the churches of The Society. If you click on one of the churches you get links to its own website, to its entry on 'A Church Near You', and to the list of other Society churches in that diocese. You can see the postcode of the church (which you can enter in Satnav), you can get a close-up map, and even a street view. And if you enter your postcode, you'll get detailed directions on how to get there. So if you are going on holiday or thinking of moving, and are looking for a church in which you can worship with confidence, without having to try to find out first who might be presiding at the Eucharist and who may have ordained him, this is the website for you. As of today there are 238 parishes affiliated to The Society and a total of 270 places of worship on the map. But there are 62 Forward in Faith parishes and another 110 full resolution parishes that are not yet affiliated. If you affiliate to The Society, there is no extra charge for staying or becoming registered with Forward in Faith. So if you worship in a parish that is under one of our bishops and your church isn't on the map, please speak to your priest or churchwardens. Passing the resolution is not enough: parishes do need to decide to affiliate, fill in the form and send it in.

So then, The Society is a structure of full communion, and in that sense it is what we call an 'ecclesial structure' – it is *like* a church. But it's not a church in an exclusive sense. We are not saying that we're alright, because we're in full communion with each other, so we have no need of the wider Church of England: quite the contrary. The Society has been formed to support us in remaining in the Church of England with integrity. What would be the point of remaining in the Church of England and then having as little as possible to do with it? This involves a sort of 'double belonging'. We belong with most intensity, most deeply, to those with whom we are in full communion in The Society. But we also belong to the wider fellowship of the deanery, the diocese and the Church of England. We need to maintain – or re-build – relationships with the rest of the Church of England, both because it is in our own

interest and because we have a great deal to offer to our church. We need to break the barriers down. We need to open the doors so that people who get the point can actually come in and join us. It is perfectly possible to do that while maintaining our integrity and our principles.

What are the structures of The Society? Most important is the Council of Bishops. Also important is the role of the Bishop's Representative. Our bishops are not like God. They are not omnipresent. Even the Bishop of Ebbsfleet cannot be in thirteen dioceses at once. So in most dioceses the Society bishop has a representative on the ground, relating to the diocesan bishop and the diocesan structures, but also to the parishes and their clergy – and representing the clergy to their Society bishop.

'The Society', it says on the porch card, 'guarantees a ministry in the historic, apostolic succession.' Until last year, you could tell by looking who was a priest whose ministry we could receive, and who was not. But now we have male priests ordained by women bishops. We can't receive their ministry, but how can you tell who ordained whom, for example, when you're a churchwarden arranging cover in a vacancy? One of the reasons why the Bishops invite priests to register as Priests of The Society is to help answer that question. Deacons and ordinands can register as well. They sign a Declaration which commits them to what The Society stands for. Priests and deacons submit their letters of orders to prove they were ordained by a bishop whose orders we can recognize. The Society bishop sends them a Welcome Letter, so they can prove that they are clergy of The Society. We have begun to issue identity cards to priests. I apologise that the vacancy in the Administrative Assistant's post has meant that this has had to be put 'on hold'. We will start again in the New Year.

Clergy who are not incumbents also have to submit their licence or permission to officiate. By issuing a Welcome Letter, and in due course a card, our bishops are saying that you can receive the ministry of these clergy. If they are not allowed to officiate in the Church of England, you cannot receive their ministry, so the Council of Bishops cannot commend it and they cannot be Priests or Deacons of The Society. They are still members of The Society just as we all are: the laity aren't registered either. The clergy are not members in any greater sense than laypeople are.

That leads me to a point that I need to underline as strongly as I can. The word 'Society' can be a bit misleading. It is not a clerical society like the Society of the Holy Cross. Nor is it a devotional society like the Society of King Charles the Martyr. It is not the sort of society that you join by paying a membership fee, which you expels you if you fail to pay up. There are no lists of members, clergy or lay. The Society is not a membership organization. The Second Vatican Council speaks of the Church as 'a divine society': the Society is a society in that sort of sense. Everyone who is gathered round a Society bishop in a church that is under his oversight, everyone who receives the sacraments from a priest who has made the Priest's Declaration, all those people are members of The Society, without signing anything or paying anything.

In your parish church the members are all the baptized people who receive the sacraments there – not just those who are on the electoral roll, not only those who have a standing order or belong to an envelope scheme. You become a member by baptism, confirmation and receiving communion, not by filling in a form or paying money. The same is true of The Society, because it is like a church. The Society is not a membership organization. Quite a lot of people have tried to turn it into a membership organization, to make it like a club. I have

been fighting them as manfully as I can. We cannot have The Society reduced to a members' club: it must be like a church, based not on forms and money but on the sacraments.

Now I come, finally, to Forward in Faith's role, under four headings. The first three I will call 'political' and mention only briefly. First, campaigning: this is no longer our main focus, but if any of the sacraments come under threat – baptism, the Eucharist, confirmation and confession have all been under threat either in our church or in other Anglican churches – we will campaign to defend them. Second, supporting the Catholic Group in General Synod – financially, with advice, and in the synodical elections – as we did to great effect last year. Third, we monitor implementation of the House of Bishops' Declaration and will support parishes in submitting grievances as necessary. We need our Forward in Faith identity as the flag under which this political work is done both nationally and locally.

But perhaps Forward in Faith's most important role will be supporting The Society. We sought 'an ecclesial structure which will continue the orders of bishop and priest as the Church has received them and which can guarantee a true sacramental life'; in the end, with our bishops, we created it ourselves. Now our Constitution gives us 'power to support The Society'. Forward in Faith, is, among other things, the support structure for The Society. And it *pays* for The Society. So if The Society is like your diocese, Forward in Faith is the diocesan board of finance, and our Gordon Square office is the diocesan office (albeit much smaller and cheaper). Some say, 'Now we belong to The Society, we don't need Forward in Faith'. That's like saying, 'our baptism makes us part of the Church, so we don't need the planned giving scheme: someone else will pay; we'll sit back and enjoy it'. That will not do. The office, the staff, the leaflets and brochures, the website, and much more all have to be paid for. At the moment the membership is not paying the full cost. We are relying on high-value donations and legacies. We need to recruit new members to replace those who joined twenty years ago and are now dying, or there will be no Forward in Faith in twenty years' time, and if there is no Forward in Faith there will be no Society. And we need to get our present members to be as generous as many of those older members were and are. The £30 minimum subscription sounds a lot until you realize that if you pay by standing order you can pay £2.50 a month – the cost of the cup of coffee I bought on my way here this morning. Could you afford to pay £50 (it's only £1 a week), or even £10 a month? So often, it is not those who can afford it who are the most generous. Just imagine if each of our bishops' 412 parishes recruited just two new members to Forward in Faith: that would bring in £24,000 a year. If each branch of Forward in Faith recruited 20 new members, that would be another £24,000. That would make a huge difference?

How does it work locally? Sometimes the Bishop's Representative is also the Forward in Faith clerical chairman. In others that is another priest (though in every diocese the Bishop's representative is an *ex officio* member of the branch committee). Where they are not the same person, that can work very well, as a way of sharing the burden – as long as long as the two priests work together as closely as possible. Whether you brand local activities as Society activities or Forward in Faith activities depends on what they are. If it is liturgical or devotional, it is probably a Society event. If it is raising money, or making a complaint to the Reviewer, it is Forward in Faith. Forward in Faith is a charity with bank accounts locally and nationally and can claim gift aid, and has a 'political' role. The Society is not that sort of structure.

Forward in Faith has one other important role in relation to The Society. Like a church, The Society is led by bishops; it is not a democracy. Forward in Faith is a democratically-

structured membership organization. The Council of Bishops need to consult representative clergy and laity from time to time. They do that through the Forward in Faith Council, to which six out of eight Council bishops currently belong. There is no need to duplicate the Forward in Faith structures by creating parallel Society structures for consultation, but we do need to reinvigorate our branch structures, and that will be one of the priorities for next year.