

FORWARD IN FAITH

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY 2019

ITEM 6: Reports from the Episcopal Regions 2A: The See of Fulham

The Bishop of Fulham, Fr James Wilkinson and Fr Richard Bastable

The Bishop of Fulham

First of all, I'm going to add my own particular thanks and appreciation to Dr Podmore, because possibly one of the best days' work I've ever done in my entire life was extracting him from Church House and bringing him to us here. Colin is a worshipper in two Fulham parishes, and long may they both continue to be so.

The See of Fulham is presently (the number keeps going up and down a little bit) 50 parishes in the Diocese of London and 14 in the Diocese of Southwark. Just to put that into some sort of context, 50 parishes in the Diocese of London is just marginally under 12.5%, so it is a significant percentage of the total. When you add in the parishes in the Diocese of London that look to the Bishop of Maidstone for oversight (and we work very well together, Bishop Rod and I), you get well over 15% a – a good chunk of the Diocese of London.

In the Diocese of Southwark – for those 14 wonderful parishes – I operate like a Provincial Episcopal Visitor, but in the Diocese of London we have something called the London Plan, which gives me, as Bishop of Fulham, some more hefty jurisdiction than is granted to the PEVs. That can sometimes be a little bit of a burden, but a lot of the time it is a real blessing, because it means, for instance, that everything to do with appointments in those London parishes falls to me, and I can sponsor ordinands for training, and so on and so forth. The London Plan has been particularly commended by the Bishop of London and others as a good model for national adoption, so that something similar to the London Plan happens in every diocese. That would of course require the consent of all the different diocesan bishops, but it's very good that we've got that sort of flagship template for operating the Five Guiding Principles, going back first of all to when Bishop David Hope was Bishop of London, continued by Bishop Chartres, and continued today.

The two presentations that follow will focus on the key areas of vocation to the ordained ministries of the Church and lay vocation and discipleship. I have been able in more recent times to build just a little team – a sort of Fulham curia – which has helped me so much to take forward the life and mission of the Area. Prominent in that 'curia' are Fr James Wilkinson, who is my PA and Chaplain (and also Priest in Charge of the Guild Church of St Dunstan in the West), and Fr Philip Barnes, who (as well as being the Vicar of St Stephen's, Gloucester Road) is my Mission Adviser. He is able to hold that portfolio because of generous funding from one of our catholic societies. (Up and down the country we are relying more and more on our catholic societies and trusts to help us put together imaginative and creative ways of deploying clergy to really make a difference on the ground.) I offer my great thanks to them and to Fr Richard Bastable, who is my Vocations Adviser. That little team has been enormously helpful in prospering the good fortune of the Fulham Area.

I will leave you with this thought. Wherever I go around London and Southwark, I am asked two questions. The first question is, 'Do you support Fulham?', and the second question is

‘Do you live in Fulham Palace?’ To the first question, I can very cheerfully answer, ‘No’, and to the second question I can cheerfully answer, ‘I’m working on it.’

Fr James Wilkinson

The Diocese of London likes to call me the Bishop’s PA, but for those that prefer ‘old money’, think of me as the Domestic Chaplain. I am going to speak about three areas of our life in Fulham.

The first is Vocations (because Fr Bastable, the Vocations Adviser, can’t be here today). At the moment, we have 10 Fulham traditionalist candidates in training – six at St Stephen’s House, two at St Augustine’s (the part-time course for the Diocese of Southwark), one at St Mellitus and one at Wycilffe Hall. Two of these are from the Diocese of Southwark. In the process of discernment with the Diocesan Director of Ordinands there are another two candidates and in discernment with the Bishop of Fulham’s Vocations Adviser, Fr Richard Bastable, there are three, with a further three just coming into the system.

There is a Fulham Vocations Group, which meets two or three times a year, for those at various stages of their development – including those who are deacons. This group meets to encourage one another, to support one another, and to learn about the processes that they are going through and share how things are going for them. On 2 November we had our most recent meeting: the Bishop of London came to speak and get to the Group’s members.

Moving on to Ordinations, last Pentecost the Bishop ordained five deacons (two of whom are self-supporting ministers) and one priest (also a self-supporting minister). In 2020 Bishop Jonathan hopes to ordain six priests and at least two deacons (we might hope and pray for some more). To have five deacons ordained in one service was a great thing for the Diocese of London and for the Fulham constituency.

I also want to mention the Fulham Epiphany Festival at Southwark Cathedral on Saturday 11 January 2020. There will be a Solemn Mass at 11am with children’s ministry, and afternoon workshops on Baptism preparation, Marriage preparation and what we have called Gifts: Time and Talents (the angle of stewardship that isn’t about money). All of these things are linked with the traditional Epiphanytide themes. We’ll end with Benediction at St Magnus the Martyr, just over the Bridge. All are welcome, whether they are from the Fulham Area or not, and Fulham, Society and SSC priests are welcome to concelebrate.

Fr Philip Barnes

Baptism is that great gift to the Church, which gives us all that we need to take our place in the mission of God’s Church, and it’s growth in our confidence in our baptismal calling that we’ve been focusing on in the See of Fulham over the last few months.

It was just over a year ago that about 230 of us gathered in St Alban the Martyr for our first Lay Congress, an event that we called ‘Living the Gospel: the call of all the baptised’. Our aim on that occasion was to renew our confidence in the living out of faith in our daily lives. We were conscious of the extraordinary things that many members of our congregations are doing, and we wanted both to celebrate those things and to inspire confidence in all of us to carry into our daily lives the gift of the Gospel – to become, in the very endearing words of Pope Francis in his encyclical *Gaudete et Exsultate*, ‘saints next door’.

We began the day with a Bible study on the Pearl of Great Price. We were challenged to think of our faith as a great treasure that we give away rather than hoard to ourselves. That was a theme that was picked up on by the then Chief Executive of the Church Army, Mark Russell, who gave us a keynote address. In it he spoke of the Church as an institution that is radical in its proclamation of hope through word and deed, and he spoke of the transformative power of the local church to bring healing and hope to our communities, and of the capacity each of us has to share the love of Christ.

Later in the day it was that capacity for sharing love that we heard about from six members of Fulham parishes: people like Toddy, a young mum from one of our parishes who told us about the way she shares her faith at work, simply by giving and word of encouragement to those who come into her shop; or Sandy, who is recently retired, and told us about how she mentored a young woman going through difficulties and drew her into the life of the Church and helped her to set out on a new path.

The day concluded with the Bishop reminding us that we are at the heart of the continuing mission of Jesus Christ. He used the very vivid image of the baptised being like God's kindling, God's tinderbox, who, ignited by the Holy Spirit, set the world ablaze with the love of God. It is, he said, the committed disciple who can measure up to that challenge, and so, as the day concluded, we gathered around the font to renew baptismal commitment and to be commissioned as ambassadors for Christ in daily life.

We left with a renewed sense of what is possible. We've tried to follow up that theme in other events across the See of Fulham in the last few months. Lent saw us gathering around our Bishop for four teaching days on the fundamental elements of Christian discipleship: Baptism, Scripture, Eucharist and Prayer. Over 200 people joined in those teaching days with many more using the study materials in their own parishes, thinking about our essential identity as Catholic Christians, and what is distinctive about our character as parishes belonging to the See of Fulham: those who have a strong sense of being incorporated into the Mystical Body of Christ at Baptism, joined by that sacrament into the Church Catholic; those who sit under Scripture and who have a living commitment to Scripture, and who reflect daily on its challenge to us; of how at the heart of every one of our parishes is the celebration of the Eucharist, and how the Sunday gathering for the Mass is that formative experience, with a strong sense of mission as drawing people to encounter the living Christ in the Eucharist, and with an attention to invitation, welcome and hospitality. And then that sense of growth in holiness through a disciplined life of prayer as a key task for all of us.

With this increasing sense of focus and identity for our parishes, our last event together was offering some practical tools for mission for key areas in our corporate life. A good number of us gathered at St Alban the Martyr again in October for a day brimming with practical ideas for renewing parish ministry. Clare Williams was with us, giving us some simple steps to improve our ministry with children and young people – with the reminder to us that the vast majority of Christians come to faith when they are young. George Reynolds led a workshop on how we engage with digital media – simple steps like using the A Church near You website and then maybe a parish Twitter or Facebook account. A team from St James, Paddington, spoke about Stewardship and gave some excellent examples of how to run a basic parish stewardship campaign. And the Director of Music of one of our parishes spoke about how we could reinvigorate the music of our churches and use resources effectively.

We are looking to delivering some of these ideas and resources more widely in our parishes in Lent next year, with a course that picks up those themes for mission; and how we continue such a positive momentum in our lively and growing churches.