

FORWARD IN FAITH

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY 2019

ITEM 6: Reports from the Episcopal Regions 2B: The See of Richborough

Fr Edward Martin SCC and Fr Paul Noble SSC (The Bishop of Richborough's representatives in the Diocese of Lincoln)

What we are sharing with you this afternoon is simply what Bishop Norman instructed us to speak about: the good things that he has been aware of in the Richborough Area this year, as well as a couple of his concerns.

Every year or every other year Bishop Norman tries to gather as many of the Richborough Family together in strategic centres (usually cathedrals) to celebrate our faith and our unity, and our coming together with him as our bishop, and to witness to that faith. Usually we have a theme, and this year we looked to the seventeenth-century Anglican priest and poet George Herbert to provide us with the strapline 'Love bids us Welcome'. We focussed on the generosity of God and specifically in the generosity of the welcome we are given in the Eucharist.

The first of our gatherings was on 18 May, at Leicester Cathedral, which now houses the tomb of Richard III. It was mainly for the East Midland dioceses of the See of Richborough: Leicester, Lincoln and Peterborough. Clergy and laity gathered to fill the nave. The Bible Study followed in the Cathedral Centre.

The second of these gatherings was on 10 August, for the Eastern dioceses north of the Thames: St Albans, Chelmsford, Norwich, Ely, and St Edmundsbury and Ipswich. This is an annual event, on Bishop Norman's home patch (he lives in St Albans). Numbers this year were larger than before and the Bible Study followed the picnic lunch in Bishop Norman's garden. Bishop Norman delivers the Bible Study from the 'episcopal balcony' of Parkside House.

The third event was held at Rochester Cathedral for the Southern dioceses: Rochester (with some help and support from Southwark), Canterbury, Portsmouth, Winchester, and Guildford, and also friends from Chichester. It was held on Holy Cross Day (14 September), and that meant extra support from SSC priests in the area too.

After all three festivals, it's a fair reckoning that over a thousand laity from Richborough parishes attended overall, together with a good numbers of the parish clergy. One common feature of all three festivals was the warm welcome we received from all three cathedrals and the encouragement and support that was given by cathedral staff and volunteers.

One thing that we are confident in saying is that Richborough clergy know is that Bishop Norman can be depended upon to be in our parishes for festivals, anniversaries or ordinary Sunday worship. In our own Lincoln Diocese, where in 2018 there were eight benefices with the Resolution in place (this year there are nine – we are one of those dioceses that have an extra parish this year), in 2018 he visited every single benefice. and one University Chaplaincy he visited every benefice, as well as a university chaplain who looks to him, at least once during the year and did seven confirmations.

Across the See this year, as last year, the number of confirmation services has been over 40. By 31 December this year, Bishop Norman will have undertaken 44 confirmations in the See of Richborough. Our people are so pleased that by and large there is the opportunity to be confirmed in their own church, with the support of their own worshipping community. That, it has to be said, is something that is becoming rarer across the rest of the Church of England. where in some dioceses diocesan and suffragan bishops between them are only doing around 15-18 confirmations a year. In some dioceses, therefore three or four bishops are doing 15-18 confirmations in total. As they say:do the maths!

The Richborough family parishes are generally in good heart. At last count there are 98 parishes, and fewer than five of those are currently in vacancy. A particular success story this year is filling vacancies in the Diocese of Canterbury.

Bishop Norman is the only Society Bishop whose remit goes overseas. There is one Richborough Family parish on the Isle of Jersey, and on the continent there is the Chaplaincy at Antwerp. It does mean more travelling for him, but it is important to keep in touch with your family overseas, so there are visits to clergy and churches who identify with him and also visits to foster ecumenical links. The ecumenical link was seen most recently in September, at Sister Gerd's retreat house near Malmo, Sweden, where Bishop Norman presided over a small conference of priests from Richborough parishes (with support from Southwark) and priests of the Church of Sweden, to study priesthood and the ordination rites of both churches.

There are two areas of concern that Bishop Norman wanted to flag up, and we have heard both of these from other areas. The first is deanery plans and diocesan schemes for pastoral re-organisation, which often present potential threats to Richborough parishes through re-grouping and/or cuts in clergy numbers. The second need is the ongoing need for more vocations, because that will mean more priests.

As well as those forty confirmation, there have also been success in filling vacancies, and the very successful chrisms masses as well: that was 2019.

Plans are already underway for 2020. Earlier this month Bishop Norman met with his diocesan Representatives to make plans and set dates. There are plans for a Eucharistic Conference for clergy in November 2020. We shall have further Richborough Family gatherings: in Canterbury Cathedral and again at St Albans. Our brothers and sisters in the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales have decided that the year until Advent 2020 is the going to be the Year of the Word, with the strapline 'The God who speaks'. We had a purple wristband to identify ourselves as the 'Richborough Family' a good few years back. Then for the Year of Mercy we had yellow ones. In 2019, as it was 'Love bids us welcome', we had red ones. And for next year, for the chrisms masses and festival masses, it will be luminous green ones for The God who speaks. They've already been ordered!