



# GO... MAKE DISCIPLES

A Pastoral Message from Bishop Mark O'Toole  
May 2017



**“GO... MAKE DISCIPLES” – Evangelising Parishes – A Pastoral Message to the Priests, Deacons, Religious and Lay faithful of the Diocese of Plymouth.**

TWO YEARS AGO, I shared a pastoral vision for the Diocese in the Letter, *It is the Lord*. You will know that this was a reflection on the Holy Father’s Encyclical Letter, *Evangelii Gaudium*, The Joy of the Gospel, and came out at the end of my first year as Bishop.

I felt it was important to share some thoughts with you all, just over two years on, most especially on how our efforts are progressing, and also to give some pointers as to how we can continue to give “the reason for the hope that is within” (1 Peter 3:15) and to share our faith with confidence and enthusiasm

It is such a huge privilege for me to be Bishop of this beautiful diocese. I have enjoyed most especially visiting our parishes and schools, and being with our priests, deacons, religious and people. I have been struck by the dedication and commitment of so many good people and the great fidelity of our priests and deacons. Before coming to the diocese, I had only heard about the ‘quiet heroism’ of our clergy; now I know of it from personal experience, and I never fail to be inspired, moved and deeply encouraged by their witness.

At the same time I have become increasingly conscious of the challenge that lies before us as a Diocese. Many speak of the pressures put on our priests, in covering such a large geographic area. They speak of a ‘crisis of priests’ in the diocese; what I see is a ‘crisis of disciples’. In the Counties of Cornwall (549,000), Devon (767, 400) and Dorset (418,300) the total population is something like 2,234,700.

The Church-going Catholic population, based on the figures from 2015, breaks down as follows:

## GO... MAKE DISCIPLES. BISHOP MARK O'TOOLE

Cornwall (including Isles of Scilly)	2,309
Devon	7,419
Dorset	4,229
Total (for 2015)	13,95

This means that, at present, less than 1% of the population in the area our diocese covers regularly attends a Catholic Church. That is something akin to the percentages in countries like Pakistan or Myanmar (Burma), so we are very much 'mission territory'

If we look at what has happened to the Catholic community in this part of the country over the past thirty years we see how stark things are. In 1986, there were 26,577 regularly attending Mass in a Catholic Church. That means that the numbers attending a Catholic Church in our diocese have almost halved in those thirty years.

I recognise that we have to be careful 'playing the numbers game'. Of course, many more Catholics come to our churches intermittently or at key moments of their life. Often, we are ministering and supporting many more people than the official statistics indicate. Neither should we be overwhelmed by the numbers, as though what is asked of us is too much, or impossible. To do so, would be to doubt the Lord's presence with us, or the power of the Gospel. We need only think of the images Jesus uses in the Gospels when he speaks of the "leaven.....in the dough" (Luke 13:20), or being "salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13), or the "light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). In this sense, we recognise our impact in society can far outweigh the numbers.

Also, despite our challenging numbers, we are not fundamentally driven by that. Let us not listen to those 'prophets of doom' who all too readily speak of the demise of the Catholic faith altogether. We are not primarily motivated by that. Our motivation is that we love Jesus and we want others to know the beauty of His

## GO... MAKE DISCIPLES. BISHOP MARK O'TOOLE

friendship and His love. Often I have repeated a simple three-step strategy for sharing this truth:

- Remember that Jesus is your best friend
- Make a new friend
- Introduce your friend to Jesus.

Our desire to share our faith - to evangelise - is driven then, not primarily by numbers. Yes, of course I want to see more people finding their home within the Catholic Church in our diocese. But our motivation for this is because we believe that it is within the Church that we experience and encounter Jesus, we are given a path in which to follow Him, and deepen our love of Him. We love being His disciples, and we want others to be His disciples, too.

It is for this reason that Pope Francis speaks of a parish as a "sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey", (*Evangelii Gaudium* 27). It is predominately within the boundary of the parish that Catholics live out their faith; where we build our homes, raise families; minister to the elderly, the sick and bereaved; accompany the young and educate our children. The parish is, therefore, the precious place of God's grace, a place in which every baptised Catholic is called to deepen their own love and friendship of Jesus Christ and, at the same time to 'make disciples'. It is not a matter of either having a deep relationship with Jesus or going out to help others encounter Him. It is both. Pope Francis speaks of being "missionary disciples"; each of us staying close to Jesus and deepening our love of Him, and at the same time, going out to others that they may come to follow Him, too. Each of us is called to be a 'disciple-making disciple'. Further, a local Church which is not making disciples is failing in a fundamental aspect of its life. And the question we must ask ourselves, therefore, is 'are our parishes' places that make disciples'?

From my experience of travelling around this lovely diocese, in meeting so many wonderful people and clergy, and in reflecting on our call to be disciple-making disciples, I would like to share with you eight traits of an Evangelising Parish. The traits I have identified are: Prayer, Vision, an Evangelising Team, the Eucharist, Loving Service, Rigorous Adult Formation, Small Groups, and Missionary Zeal.

## PRAYER

WE ARE NOT COMMUNICATING a message but a person. We cannot give what we have not got. We must remember that prayer is not something to be done at the beginning and left behind, as we sometimes do at meetings. We must have sustained prayer, for each initiative in the parish. I know one of the graces of these past few years is that some people can identify themselves as the 'prayers' in a community, for particular initiatives. I remember hearing about a group in the diocese who were running a day for young people, and they went and sat in the chairs for a half hour before the young people arrived, in order to pray for the ones who were going to sit in those chairs.

It is important to remember that all of us are called to deepen our encounter with Jesus, and to draw close to Him in prayer. There is the importance of increasing prayer opportunities in the parish, especially the devotional life; rosary, pilgrimages, intercessory prayer, times of Eucharistic Adoration and especially prayer offered by the sick and housebound whose prayer is particularly efficacious. There is the need to encourage and model prayer in the home, in families and from children who un-self-consciously articulate their love for Jesus and Mary when

## GO... MAKE DISCIPLES. BISHOP MARK O'TOOLE

encouraged to do so. Children can teach us so much about what it means to trust in Jesus.

Of course, the fundamental thing about our prayer is that we recognise this is ultimately not our work, but God's. Do we really believe it? Do we live as though we believe Jesus is with us, as He promised He would be, or do we live as practical atheists? In this respect, cynicism can be a particular fault that priests, and I, as Bishop, can suffer from. It is a manifestation of a practical form of atheism. We must ask the Holy Spirit to rid us of it daily.

## VISION

WE KNOW WHAT THE VISION IS. It is primary proclamation. I come back again and again to what Pope Francis says in *Evangelii Gaudium* 164:

*“the first proclamation must ring out over and over: “Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you.” This first proclamation is called “first” not because it exists at the beginning and can then be forgotten or replaced by other more important things. It is first in a qualitative sense because it is the principal proclamation, the one which we must hear again and again in different ways, the one which we must announce one way or another”.*

I believe small aims, well carried out, are more effective than huge plans. Be concrete, be real. Focus on the person in front of you, and on bringing this person to a deeper friendship and love of Jesus.

## GO... MAKE DISCIPLES. BISHOP MARK O'TOOLE

Our focus is a love of the Lord and really believing that in the Church we encounter Him, we walk as fellow pilgrims and disciples, and that a path of conversion and holiness is possible.

We do not get distracted by discussions on hot button topics. In fact, our approach to those is through a positive apologetics, not to try to change Church Teaching, but to really see it as wholesome, and life giving, finding ways to be able to communicate our faith in simple and accessible ways. As has often been said, 'to speak the truth with compassion'.

Similarly, we do not harangue people into faith. We invite, we offer, we continue to keep our relationships with people open. We concentrate on what is beautiful in our relationship with Jesus, how He has transformed, and continues to transform our lives. We open ourselves more deeply to His love for us, and we seek opportunities to share this with others in the daily circumstances of our lives.

## EVANGELISATION TEAM

IN MANY WAYS THIS IS A DIFFICULT ONE, as it could give the impression that 'sharing faith – evangelisation' is the task of only a few in the parish. The reality, of course, is that every Catholic is called to do this. It is a crucial part of the vocation of being a disciple. It is part and parcel of the gift of faith; the Holy Spirit has been "poured into our hearts" (Romans 5:5). Therefore we have everything we need to be disciple-making disciples. "Lord, I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). If we honestly pray this in order to have greater confidence to share our faith, then the Holy Spirit will nudge us in the right way.

## GO... MAKE DISCIPLES. BISHOP MARK O'TOOLE

At the same time, for a parish to truly become a community of disciple-making disciples, there needs to be a group who stimulate evangelising efforts, who meet regularly to reflect on experiences of evangelisation and who regularly look at the parish diary and life, to see what opportunities for 'going out' there are on the horizon.

I am delighted to see that at present, we have 38 Parish Evangelisation Teams across the diocese, with several more in progress. Something like 500 people have engaged with the first phase of building teams in the diocese, and about two-thirds of these have established themselves in teams.

The parish priest cannot do everything by himself, neither should he. Working alone, it is hard to remain motivated. We run out of energy or focus. Different people bring different gifts. But together we can support and move things forward.

It is also key to remember that there is an important sacramental complementarity here between the ordained and the baptised. I have been struck again and again by this as I have gone from parish to parish. People love their priests, and know that his ministry is irreplaceable in order for them to develop and deepen their relationship with Jesus. At the same time, our priests experience their greatest happiness in seeing their people grow in holiness, and in deepening their discipleship. Priest and people live alongside one another and challenge and support one another to live the particularity of their vocation in fidelity and at depth. One cannot exist without the other.

Once a parish has a group reflecting on evangelisation, talking about how they might have greater confidence to speak about Jesus to others, then it becomes clear who has a passion to stimulate and encourage. It is important that a group is not 'turned in on itself' as groups in ecclesial circles can sometimes

be. It is crucial to maintain an open process; that's the way the Holy Spirit works in my experience. I have been amazed at the people I have seen come forward in this.

If we have embarked on sharing our faith with others, it is important to remember that we are not the only ones in our Church concerned about disappearing Catholics, or where the young are going, or how we can grow in confidence to raise our voice in society so that others may come to encounter the beauty of Jesus. I have seen that many really want to be involved and do something but do not know what. It is important that those of us involved in leadership in a parish, and in the diocese, continue to provide opportunities for others to participate.

## THE EUCHARIST

WE KNOW THAT THE EUCHARIST is a vital path for making disciples and sharing faith. It is itself evangelising. It is there that we breathe the fresh air of the divine presence and are healed of our wounds. The Sacraments, the Church's liturgy, Eucharistic adoration, sacred music, the beauty of the Church building, are all important in discovering the numinous, a sense of the transcendent, the reality that we are created to worship God.

It is in the Eucharist especially that we meet and encounter Jesus. Ultimately we want more and more people to come to know Jesus in this way. Jesus' Eucharistic presence is not only experienced at Mass. It has been beautiful to see how important Eucharistic adoration has been in evangelisation efforts in parishes. Many have experienced the Catholic Church in a new way through the experience of Adoration through 'Night Fever' initiatives, and through '24 hours for the Lord'. It has been lovely, too, to see how

## GO... MAKE DISCIPLES. BISHOP MARK O'TOOLE

parishes have taken up 'The Light is on for you.' initiative, where parish churches have been kept open on set evenings for Eucharistic Adoration and Sacramental Confession. I encourage you to continue with these opportunities.

Within this is the power and the place of beauty. The Church uses the phrase *via pulcritudinis* – the way of beauty. We believe that we come to know God through what is true, good and beautiful. In Catholic theology these are called 'the transcendentals' because they bring us into contact with God. Perhaps, in the past, we have concentrated on the first two - on truth and goodness. In this missionary key, in order to be disciple-making disciples, we do not try to argue people into faith, or badger them about what they are doing right or wrong. We provide opportunities for them to see or experience the beauty of the Eucharist, of the encounter with Jesus, the face of the Father's mercy.

I think we also need to be self-critical about what it's like to come to our Church. What is our Liturgy, the celebration of Mass, like?

We know that the Eucharist can transform. It opens people up. It puts us all in touch with another part of reality.

Increasingly in society, people are left in a two-dimensional universe, so the experience of God at Mass in a Catholic Church should always focus on our worship of God, and bring others into this reality step by step.

I must say that I have been deeply touched by the warm welcome I have received as I have visited our parishes. A thought has often struck me, 'I wonder what's it like for a newcomer'? Are our churches and our Sunday masses geared mainly to those who practise? How do we welcome those who are trying to make their way back to Church, or who are 'visiting' a Catholic Church? Is anything in place for them?

I have been encouraged by some of the steps that certain parishes are taking in this regard, for example, having particular Sundays, or other celebrations of Mass in the week, where people are invited to 'return' or where they are brought along for the first time by a friend. Let us never take for granted the really transforming power of Jesus' Eucharistic Presence. Let us open this to more and more in our society so desperately looking for an 'oasis' in the deserts of modern life.

## LOVING SERVICE

WE OFTEN THINK THAT OUR 'active' life of service is somehow opposed to our life of contemplation and prayer. But in both dimensions of our life, we are seeking to encounter Jesus and to serve Him. Matthew 25 makes this very clear. The Lord that we worship and adore in the Blessed Sacrament we also encounter in the least of His brothers and sisters.

This is always clear to us whenever we embark on some concrete action with and for those who are poor. It has been good these past three years to discover the variety of ways in which Catholics in the Diocese are engaged in projects of loving service of neighbour - food banks, homeless projects, street pastors, outreach to those with special needs, support of CAFOD, Aid to the Church in Need, Missio and Apostelship of the Sea. Recently I had the chance to go once more on pilgrimage with HCPT, the Pilgrimage Trust, which takes special needs children to Lourdes in Eastertide. I was struck once more by the fact that we experience the Lord on the Cross in these, some of the least of His children. In their love and suffering, and their great joy, they teach us how to live our faith in simple and practical ways. They

## GO... MAKE DISCIPLES. BISHOP MARK O'TOOLE

show us the living body of Jesus present in His Resurrected wounds in which he manifests the depth of his love and his suffering. The reality is that our personal encounter with Jesus in prayer, helps us to see Him in those who are least, and when we meet Him in them we also want to seek Him in prayer, in the Blessed Sacrament, at Mass, and in our prayerful reading of the Scriptures.

At present in the Diocese we are seeking to initiate a Diocesan Caritas which will help support and encourage practical initiatives of loving service at local parish level. This will include practical ways in which we can assist in the situation of refugees and those caught up in modern forms of slavery. I have been deeply touched to hear of the desire of parishioners across the diocese to be involved in these areas of loving service.

Neither should we see this as in conflict with our desire for people to deepen their personal relationship with Jesus, or as a hindrance to sharing our faith. Perhaps we need to grow in confidence about being more explicit about the motivation for the good works we do. This too, is part of sharing our faith. It is not a matter of proselytising but of helping others, and ourselves, to see the intimate connection between the love of Jesus and the love of our neighbour, between action and contemplation.

## RIGOROUS ADULT FORMATION

HISTORICALLY, CATHOLICS BELONGED to a variety of sodalities and groups. In each there was a sharing and a formation in faith. Nowadays, life is more fragmented and disparate. People are at different levels and at different points on the journey. As I have travelled around the diocese and listened to people's stories of

their faith and life, again and again, I have been aware of the silent struggles that many experience. Alongside this, is an awareness of 'sitting' with many of the questions shared by our contemporaries: "Does life really have any meaning? How do I bring science and religion together? Surely it is science that gives us the Truth, whereas faith, is it not just private opinion? You believe what you want and I believe what I want; it doesn't really matter, does it? What happens after death? Why do such good people suffer? Surely a good God would not allow this? Are human beings worth anything? Am I?"

These are some of the questions that many in our society ask, often implicitly. We know it is only ultimately in Jesus that each of these questions finds its proper place.

So we need to provide contexts where people can properly explore the questions that are at the heart of modern living, and where they can receive accompaniment and guidance from the richness of the Church's tradition. I would hope that some of the initiatives offered through our Vicariate for Evangelisation and Catechesis will continue to give opportunities to grow in confidence in sharing our faith with others, as we all grapple with these questions, and find our meaning in Jesus Christ.

It has been wonderful, as I have travelled around the Diocese, to experience something of the faith of good people giving so generously of their time in so many Catechetical programmes – First Communion, Confirmation, RCIA, Baptism and Marriage. So many people work so hard, and so faithfully, to 'pass on' the faith in these contexts. A key reflection for a parish, is 'what do we commit in the parish's resources to assist them, and to help form them, so that they have confidence in what they are doing, and are using the best possible methods and resources?'

## GO... MAKE DISCIPLES. BISHOP MARK O'TOOLE

We all know that we learn step by step, and that learning is life-long. What do we offer, in the parish and in Diocese that will assist people at different levels and stages, so that their journey of discipleship is also deepening and expanding?

The Church's vision is that every moment of teaching, of catechesis, is also a moment of evangelisation. I believe that we have not taken this to heart in this country. We catechise, but do we really evangelise? Do our people leave our catechetical programmes with a sense of having been called by Jesus, that He is in their life and He wants them to know how very close to them He actually is? We form people and send them forth in the faith but do they really have a sense of Jesus' personal call? As disciples, if we have not really had a sense that we are called by Jesus, that He desires us personally, then being formed and sent forth is like building on sand.

In our schools, too, we need to ensure the intimate connection between solid academic and professional excellence, and a clear and strong Catholic identity which keeps the person of Jesus at the heart of what we do. Our children deserve nothing less.

Celebrating the sacrament of Confirmation and meeting our young people through the chaplaincies, in schools and on pilgrimages in Lourdes and to World Youth Day, have been some of the most rewarding parts of my ministry these past three years. I would say that we need especially to develop opportunities to reach out to young people and provide them with solid accompaniment and formation. Personally, I am delighted that this is the theme of the next Synod in Rome, "Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment". Young people are not only our future, but our present too. The Church understands this particularly as building a culture of vocation. God has a dream in his heart for each person. Can we

really assist young people to believe this and discover it? What accompaniment can we give them?

The reality is that once we begin to engage people, they will want more formation. And we have to be prepared to offer it in ways that people can access.

## SMALL GROUP ENCOUNTER

I FIRST LEARNED THE IMPORTANCE of small groups or small communities whilst on parish placements in various places, both as a young man and as a priest. I have seen their value, too, since I became bishop. There is, for all of us, the reality of Sunday Mass and participation in Christ's Sacrifice. For many, alongside this, and complementing the regular Sunday experience, is engagement in a small group or small community. In such a group I am able to be myself and share my faith openly. I can speak of my struggles and joys, explore how I can grow in faith, and be challenged.

In such groups, the prayerful reading of Scripture – *lectio divina* – has a particular place. We can be amazed what happens when people are given the opportunity in such settings to look at their life alongside the Scriptures, to simply place a page of my life alongside a page of the Bible.

This is something that the new ecclesial communities do well. I think we need to be open to the experience of those people who are in such communities and who live in our parishes. It has been a joy to meet a number of them these past three years. I am thinking of members from Youth 2000, Focolare, Communion and Liberation, Teams of Our Lady, Families of Nazareth, the Neo-

## GO...MAKE DISCIPLES. BISHOP MARK O'TOOLE

Catechumenal Way. Too often, perhaps, we look at these individuals with a certain suspicion, as though having too much enthusiasm, or a particular spirituality, is a problem! There are some people in these who have really good experience. Very often, they are in a process of ongoing formation, have a real love for the Lord and for His Church. We need to tap that energy and enthusiasm.

Of course, I recognise that having extra groups meet in some of our parishes can be a challenge, where rural communities are widely spread and scattered. It is not always easy for people to come together. I have been struck by the fact that in a number of parish's, catechesis takes place on the Sunday, after the main Mass. Many parents bring their children to this and wait in the parish halls afterwards, socialising with other families. I wonder if this might be an opportunity to establish some small groups for parents and to accompany them in their faith with some formation and small experiences of the prayerful reading of Scripture.

There can be interconnectedness with the Evangelisation Team too. One of the most significant dimensions for these teams is their focus on having conversations about faith with people whom they meet. The aim is to grow in confidence in talking about our faith. Many of us are not at ease with this. The small group helps. It encourages us to 'go out', it provides some of the language, and it keeps a consciousness about this outreach. The dynamic is of 'going out, and sharing faith, then coming back to reflect upon the experience with others'. This helps us to find our voice and to be confident in sharing it. It is what Jesus did in the Gospels when he sent his disciples forth. The Lord helps us, by giving us companions on the journey, fellow disciples, who with us, want to be better disciple-making disciples.

## MISSIONARY ZEAL

MISSION DESCRIBES THE VERY HEART OF GOD. The Father sends the Son in order to bring His love into our world and into every human heart. The Son willingly accepts the Father's Mission. Out of love for the Father he comes into our world. Not only is Jesus the human face of God, but He is humbler yet, even to accepting death on a Cross (Philippians 2). The Spirit accompanies the Son in His Mission, and continues to animate Jesus' followers so that they may participate in the Son's mission and come to the Father's house. We have come to know God because He has gone outside of Himself.

Our zeal for Mission is a participation in this going forth from, and return, to God. We have a heart 'for the other', to bring them to Jesus, that He might bring them to the Father and that they might be 'at home' with Him. We do not seek to bring others to ourselves.

We must ask ourselves, are the different initiatives of the parish, 'open' to those who do not yet believe, or are we a circle of friends closed in on ourselves? Do we focus on maintaining the status quo in parish life, or are we capable of new initiatives which 'reach out' to those who do not know Jesus, so that they might have the opportunities for real encounters with Him?

If we have encountered Jesus and experienced something of the depth of His love in our lives, and in the lives of those we love, then we know that we have no option other than to help others have this experience too. Jesus is 'an event' which has happened in our lives and we want others to encounter Him, too, because we know that our ongoing encounter with Him is the only thing

which brings real meaning and purpose to our lives. Trying to help others come into this encounter with Jesus is not just one more task among all the other things we have to do. It is the heart of what we do, and should be the criterion against which we judge all that we do.

## CONCLUSION

YOU WILL BE RECEIVING THIS MESSAGE as we continue the journey through Eastertide, and prepare for the great Feast of Pentecost, when we recall that great outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the disciples. The Holy Spirit thrust the disciples out on to the streets so that they would bear witness to the Risen Jesus. May the Spirit of Jesus compel us in the same way.

These thoughts are offered on the basis of my experience of the Diocese these past three years. If you have any of your own reflections on the traits I have shared, or any other thoughts that you would like to add, then I would be delighted to hear from you.

I hope that we can each deepen our love of Jesus and our desire to bring others to Him, in response to His wonderful command, "Go... make disciples" (Matthew 28:19).

SO, WITH HIM, LET'S DO IT!

Mark O'Toole  
*Bishop of Plymouth*

Eastertide 2017



*Go... make disciples of all the nations,  
baptising them in the name of the Father,  
and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

Matthew 28:19