"Becoming a Church that cares for its priests."

Sharing the journey so far.

An update from your priests.

Archdiocese *of* Liverpool

In the heart of God is the desire that each one of us should flourish and be the best version of ourselves that we can be. This is the hope for all the People of God. In the Synod of our archdiocese we often heard ideas that could be summed up like this: ***"healthy parishes need healthy priests" –*** or ***"healthy/happy priests lead to healthy/happy parishes."*** We are all aware of the many demands made on each one of us (people and priests). In the Synod people spoke about their concerns for the wellbeing (and flourishing) of their priests. Priests spoke about how increased demands are particularly challenging.

When the Synod met on June 20, 2021, the Apostolic Nuncio delivered a greeting from the Holy Father which included this:

> **"Please do not forget your priests and bishops in your prayers, in your suggestions and in your practical support. Remember that they are human beings in one of the most difficult periods in the history of the Church. Take care of the pastor who has a responsibility for the local community. Accompany them with love, patience, friendship and support."**

These concerns found their place in the Synod affirmations and recommendations. There was a clear affirmation of the need to assist priests, both personally and in their ministry as they collaborate with the Archbishop, with one another and in collaboration with the people of God.

A question that was asked was ***how can we better support our priests? How can the Archdiocese offer them guidance, further training and formation?*** There was a real concern for the way future priests are formed and a desire to be an Archdiocese that cares for its priests. Synod Recommendation #3 asked that "***a robust programme of ongoing formation be developed for the wellbeing of priests and deacons, that meets their spiritual, intellectual, practical and mental health needs."***

A Pastoral Plan for the diocese was presented in Advent 2021, based on the Synod recommendations. Part of this Plan was an externally facilitated process which explored what needs to be developed to support priests to flourish in the ***"human, spiritual, liturgical, theological, intellectual and pastoral aspects of their lives."***

At the core of this was a process of listening to the experiences of all the priests. During February and March 2022 out of **105 priests in post 99 took part** in the 1-1 interviews lasting no less than an hour each. This gave the priests the chance to say what is really going on in their lives.

- ***What is it like being a priest in the archdiocese, and what has led to this? What were early hopes and expectations of priesthood?***

- ***How does this compare to now? What experiences have led the priests of the Archdiocese of Liverpool to living and working in the way they do today?***

These interviews were followed up by a series of regional meeting with the priests.

This opportunity showed that the priests have a joy in serving as priests of the Archdiocese, but some of the priests have low morale, and face some unrealistic expectations, increasing burdens and growing challenges from both within and outside the Church. The process has also begun to enable the priests to look at the possibilities of doing things differently. ***We have asked what will enable us to grow in wellbeing and happiness, and to fully use the gifts we bring to the mission of the Church?*** We hope that we will be enabled to nurture a positive culture – a way of working – with one another and with the people of the archdiocese.

All this was done in a way that respected the confidentiality of each individual, but we also wanted to share some of our thoughts on what emerged in collaborative service of our people as we live together the mission entrusted to us by the Lord.

On May 30, 2022, we heard a report of what we had said: it was a bit like having a mirror held up to us. This is something of what we saw:

- **Workload:** We experience real joy in the priesthood – but we are also aware of the burden and exhaustion that some feel.
- **Expectations:** We feel valued and supported by our people – but we are aware of increasing demands on fewer of us.
- **Living in the world**: We feel we have something to offer the world – but we sometimes feel ill-equipped for the changing realities.
- **Lifestyle:** There are those of us who dream of new ways of living and working – but some feel lonely, isolated and vulnerable.
- **Support**: We get good support in a time of crisis – but the pressures of day-to-day ministry and the lack of support makes us feel we have to be overly self-reliant.
- **Towards older age**: We want to talk about life as an older priest – but there is anxiety of what it will be like if and when we "retire."
- **Fraternity:** We desire to be together as priests in a more honest and trustful way – but we are not sure we have the time or the commitment to do this.

In years to come the numbers of priests available for ministry will be greatly reduced. Alongside of that is the reality of falling numbers who attend or volunteer in our parishes and all that this implies. We need a strategic look at how things will be in the future. There are **105 Diocesan priests** in post at the time of writing. Of these **74 are under the age of 70. (24 are under 50, 15 are between 51 and 60 and 35 are 60 – 69)** There are still **31 priests aged 70 – 75+ with a full-time appointment.**

This means that in **2030** we are likely to have **74 priests** and in **2040** the figure is likely to be **39 priests**.

In the Diocese we have **140 parishes** (21 are looked after by religious orders or congregations.)

This is the context in which we live out our priesthood in the Archdiocese and out of which these reflections have emerged.

The way forward

Reflecting on our experiences and our sharing together the priests want to focus on these five key areas.

- Fraternity
- Ways of working
- Safeguarding
- Wellbeing and Care of Self
- Retirement

Fraternity

1. **We will ensure no priest needs to feel isolated.**
- We will pray and share faith together and enable access to support groups

2. **We will give ourselves permission to care for and trust one another**
- We will develop a renewed appreciation of our Bishop and our mutual care for one another.

3. **We acknowledge and accept the diverse ways of being a priest in the archdiocese**.
- We will seek to have a structured programme of ongoing formation with real diversity.

Ways of working

1. **We will enable different models of priesthood and different gifts of priests to flourish.**
- We will find out the formation need of each priest and commit to deanery and regional structures

2. **We will imagine new ways of working**
- We will try to set up several different models of how priests can live and work

3. **We will move from a parochial to a presbyteral way of working**
- We will commit to thinking of the needs of the wider group, not just my own ministry

4. **We will work collaboratively**
- We will commit to work in a co-responsible way with bishops, deacons, religious and lay people. We will commit to working synodaly with the all the diocesan central services in a more open and collaborative way

Safeguarding

1. **We are committed to creating a culture of Safeguarding**
- Safeguarding is a priority in our mission and identity. This includes demanding appropriate support for victims and survivors

Wellbeing and care of self

1. **We will care for 'the parish of our own soul.'**
- Committing to our ongoing formation – spiritual, intellectual, pastoral, liturgical and human

2. **We will commit ourselves to those who are facing difficulties and to those who feel that they are not able to engage with offered support**
- We will seek out non-threatening ways of recognising need and of offering support

3. **We commit to a system of support from seminary onwards**
- We will look to providing professional coaching, mentoring and supervision, as standard, from the beginning to the end of priests' ministry and asking that early appointments are seen to be 'training' and formation appointments

'Retirement'

1. **We are committed to changing the culture which expects, 'we will go on till we drop' – to a culture which values all stages of priestly life.**
- We will look to set up conversations about retirement, pensions, grants etc.

2. **We will move beyond 'retirement' to models of ministry appropriate to various stages of life.**
- Explore the steps that need to be taken to have a flexible approach to retirement and age-appropriate ministry and seek to stop using the phrase 'retired priests'

and find a different way of speaking about those who have set aside a full-time appointment because of age or health reasons.

Conclusion

The journey we have begun has already started to have a positive impact on how priests relate to one another. It will shape the way things are done in the future. In calling the diocesan synod the Archbishop has enabled this process to take place. We also pay tribute to the ongoing work of the Vicariate for Clergy – not least in the unseen work that takes place in the moments of need or crisis.

Learning to appreciate and value one another has been a strength of what we have done so far. Coupled with our resolve and commitment to work as a Presbyterate, we will support and encourage one another in our ministry.

From all that has been said and shared, we recognise that the time is ripe for a shift in our culture and the way we do things together. We are ready for this. Not all of us, of course, will respond in the same way. We are all different. Some will want to explore radical substantial change; others will take a more gradual approach. We all want to conserve what is good as we prepare for the future. We believe that we all have a part to play.

The Archbishop has given his blessing for us to share these thoughts with you, the people we serve, because we are all on the road together. In conclusion let us make our own the words of St Paul, in his letter to the Church of Rome:

"Do not let your love be a pretence. Love each other and have a profound respect for each other. Work for the Lord with untiring effort and with great earnestness of spirit. If you have hope, this will make you cheerful." (Rm 12: 9-12)