



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

Pastoral Letter: Floods in the South West

Bishop Mark O'Toole, Plymouth

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

In this week before the Holy season of Lent begins, I wanted to greet you all for the first time as your new Bishop. How consoling the Lord is to us, as he reminds us again and again in the Gospel today, "Do not worry."

We have been struck in these past weeks by the number in our Diocese, and indeed across the country, who have been badly affected by the poor weather. Many have lost their homes and their livelihoods, particularly in coastal areas and in our farming communities. We think especially of them at this time. I know, too, that we have been struck by the outstanding work which the emergency services have been doing and which they continue to do.

Several weeks ago I visited Dawlish and celebrated Mass in the local Parish. That community has been badly battered by the storms and the waves. But what struck me most whilst I was with them, was not so much a sense of anxiety or worry, but the great resilience of people in the face of adversity and their goodness in supporting one another during a challenging time.

Times of difficulty in life often bring forth an innate generosity, solidarity and compassion in the human heart. I believe that this is a reflection of that "tenderness of God", of which the Prophet Isaiah speaks in today's first reading: "can a mother forget her infant and be without tenderness for the child of her womb. Even if she should forget, I will never forget you".

God does not forget any of us, but holds us eternally in His love. It is this truth that Jesus came to show us, and why we have such joy in following Him. Everything we do must be seen in the light of our mission to make Jesus Christ better known and loved. This is the heart of the New Evangelisation as our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has made clear.

We know that we cannot pass on to another what we have not first experienced at a very deep level in our own lives. We need a living relationship with Jesus ourselves if we are to share Him with others. This is why the renewal of our own friendship with Jesus, a deepening love of Him, must be part of our mission to others. Our compassionate outreach to those in need is with a view not only to doing good works but because we have been so filled with the joy of our friendship with Jesus that we want others to share this, too. It would be good for us to 'break the silence' so that it become more natural for us to talk about our love of Jesus to our friends and be willing to introduce our friends to the person of Jesus, if they do not know Him, or if they have moved away from the practise of their Catholic faith.

In his recent encyclical letter, *The Joy of the Gospel* (*Evangelii Gaudium*), our Holy Father, Pope Francis, challenges us all with these words: "If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation borne of a friendship with Jesus Christ, without a communion of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us 'Give them something to eat' (Mark VI 37)."

This Lent, and in the months and years ahead, I invite each of us to draw close to Jesus and to deepen our friendship with Him. It is this which will bring about the pastoral and missionary renewal within our Diocese which Pope Francis has called for. A deepening friendship with Jesus will help us truly experience the tenderness of God. It will help us to reach out to those in need and introduce them to His friendship. It will help us to walk together as His disciples. Then indeed we know that we need not worry because Jesus walks with us; we are never alone.

Please do continue to pray for me and may God Bless you all.

Yours devotedly,

Rt Rev Mark O'Toole

Bishop of Plymouth