Pastoral Letter. First Sunday of Lent. 22nd February 2026

Lent, A Season of Preparation for Mission.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

I wish you all every blessing as we begin the season of Lent. In today's Gospel Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to prepare for his public ministry and to defeat His temptations. In scripture the wilderness is the place where God is close to His people. Often this closeness comes at a time of trial, discernment and preparation for mission. We recall Moses leading the people through the wilderness to the promised land and Elijah fleeing into the wilderness in fear for his life.

Jesus is discerning. He is preparing for his public mission. He prepares in prayer and by fasting. Both practices heighten the closeness of the love of His Father and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Jesus experiences the trials of temptation. He defeats those temptations by rejecting what is self-serving. Through His trials Jesus discerns we live by the Word of God not material things. We are not to put God to the test, rather we are called to follow His will. We worship and serve God alone. We do not worship and serve the false riches, vanity and power the world may offer us.

The Holy Spirit leads our Diocese into the wilderness of Lent. May we all through prayer, fasting and almsgiving allow God to be close to us in our discernments and trials. May we fight the temptations of self service and false gods in their many forms. May we, like Jesus, prepare ourselves for public mission.

In my last Pastoral Letter at the start of Advent, I wrote about our need to discern and act on our future mission as a diocesan family. I reflected with you the hopes and challenges our Diocese faces. One challenge I highlighted was the fewer priests we will have over the next ten years and what we can realistically expect from them. I continue to welcome non diocesan priests to minister here, and we are most grateful to them, but they will not replace all the diocesan priests who will soon retire. A second challenge was the number of churches we have maintained over the years even though Mass attendance has declined. Buildings must serve mission not the other way around. I wrote change is needed as present practice was not sustainable.

In Advent I explained there would be materials prepared to help that discernment leading to action. After consultation, those materials are now ready and are available on the diocesan website. Parish offices can print off materials if that assists you. The materials include a Parish Toolkit to guide every parish's discernment of our mission and how we can work more closely together in a sustainable way. There are materials on prayer, discernment and often asked questions to assist us all. The materials include a statement of the Diocesan vision for mission. I have consulted widely about this for the last 18 months and the vision reflects what I have listened to. I trust it is a vision we can all share even if we may prioritise different parts of it. There are also materials that give a summary of parish and diocesan realities in terms of mass attendance, number of clergy, property and other resources.

From the initial parish discernments from now until April, we will move to a second phase of discernments in the summer across parishes in each locality/partnership and then across the wider deaneries. These will then inform the discernments across the whole Diocese. We intend to complete this discernment process by the Autumn of 2026, so that informed decisions about the future can be shared.

I invite us all to discern intentionally about our mission as Jesus did in the wilderness. The Lenten practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving will guide us. We must discern in prayer, knowing the Spirit is alive in our communities. Like Jesus we must discern with an openness to fast from what is simply self-serving. We must all be aware of that temptation. We must discern by being generous in giving to one another in love. We must discern the common good for mission.

This is a spirit filled journey of listening and discerning. It must be mission led and hope filled. The Lord never leaves us. We must be honest about the reality we face now and will face in the next decade. The discernment must be an expression of shared responsibility. We are all co-responsible for the mission of the Diocese, people and clergy alike. I sincerely hope this discernment will lead to us all to reflect on how we can serve across our local parishes and so build up the Kingdom of God. We can all offer some practical service.

This discernment is not an inspection of parishes nor is it a predetermined plan of closures or reductions. There is no predetermined plan. It is not about assigning blame nor must it fall into nostalgia about the past. We learn from the past, both the good and the bad, but we do not live in the past. I understand that can cause grief and upset. We must seek to discern how the church may flourish now and in the future. If we do not act, then challenging realities will dictate actions which will leave people and communities hurt. Far better we discern together.

I wish to end where I began, with the Holy Spirit leading Jesus and our Diocese into the wilderness of Lent. The Holy Spirit is evidently at work in our parishes, schools and communities. There is so much holiness in our worship of the Lord and in the service of others. We have so much to learn from one another and share with one another. The joys and hope outweigh the challenges. Our mission is to walk with the Lord and enable others to encounter Him in our communities centered on the Eucharist. We are called to live justly, caring for our common home and especially for the poor in it. We are called to grow as one diocesan family which will necessarily mean working more closely together in new ways. Finally, we are called to be formed by Christ for mission. To be a baptised Christian is to have a mission. We are called to help every person flourish in the love of the love of the Lord and flourish in their service of others.

We are being led by the Holy Spirit, let us discern what that means for our future mission together. Please be involved in the parish discernments in the next few weeks.

With assurances of prayers,

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