

Bishop Gregor's Charge to Diocesan Synod 2018



“For the avoidance of doubt”, I think, is a phrase well-beloved of lawyers. Well, I am not a lawyer, not even a canon lawyer (I have sometimes wished I were). Nonetheless, I do rather like that phrase. So, for the avoidance of doubt and, may it be said, of speculation, I want to begin my charge this year by outlining to you my future plans. As I hope must be fairly obvious, my health has continued to improve and in October this year, assuming I get that far in this life, I will be 68, an age at which I have for quite some time thought it would be good to retire and lay down the pastoral staff on the altar of the cathedral. By then I will have been bishop of this amazing diocese for 8.5 years, a period I guess to have been quite long enough. I have already informed the Cathedral Chapter, sitting behind me in the choir stalls, of that intention, my Staff Group and the Office Staff, and now I want to make it known to the whole diocese that I intend to retire on 11th October 2018, my 68th birthday. So, this is my last charge, and has turned out to be maybe my shortest, as diocesan bishop to this synod.

What then to say? Be very personal, as I was in my addresses at the Chrism Masses? Well, no. The Dean, to whom I always listen with great care, suggested not that! Be theological? Well, I have a Canon Theologian, who is a big hitter, to be that – so maybe not *wholly* that. As a theologian, I’m not in that league. Be effusive and say what I once heard a retiring parish minister in Largs say with a frighteningly straight face at his farewell do that he had enjoyed every single minute of his time there? – certainly not, I didn’t believe that then, and I certainly could not lay my hand on my heart and say it to you now - I haven’t enjoyed every single minute of my episcopate, nor do I think I was ever meant to, even if fantasy would have had it so. As my sister would always say to me when I was being morose – *stop bellyaching, Gregor, it goes with the territory*. I don’t

think any of my ordained colleagues could say they enjoyed every minute of their ministry among us either and, if they could, I would have to wonder about them, but I hope more than a few of us, including myself, *could* and should certainly say that we are glad to be what and who we are, because that is what, in and through the church we serve, God has called us to be.

So, if these approaches to a last charge won't do, what might it do to say? Well, saying Morning Prayer on the Thursday after the Fifth Sunday of Easter, I found myself reading this, from Thomas Merton's *The Power and Meaning of Love: The union that binds the members of Christ together is not the union of proud confidence in the power of an organization. The Church is united by the humility as well as by the charity of her members. Hers is the union that comes from the consciousness of individual fallibility and poverty, from the humility which recognizes its own limitations and accepts them, the meekness that cannot take upon itself to condemn, but can only forgive because it is conscious that it has itself been forgiven by Christ.* These words leapt out at me at the time and have stayed with me into the time of the Christian year in which we meet— the part of Eastertide that is between Ascension and Pentecost. That time helps me to think that all the binding and uniting qualities listed by Merton are, surely, the work of the Holy Spirit within us, the working out of the ascended Christ's high priestly prayer that we may all be one as He and the Father are one.

Humility, love, awareness and acceptance of our poverty, fallibility and limitations, the priority of forgiveness over condemnation, these qualities, and I find them among us all over this diocese, are above all qualities, I think, which give God space to be God freely among us. For example, for quite a long time now I have thought that humility is not so much about self-abnegation as about giving the other person real space to be who they are and to rejoice in that. I think you might think the same of all these other qualities listed by Merton. And since God is the ultimate significant Other their existence among us gives space for God to be actively and graciously present at the heart of our common life, transforming us and the people around us. So, I want to suggest to you that the churches of this diocese, if they are characterized by humility, love, awareness and acceptance of our poverty, fallibility and limitations, and by the priority of forgiveness over condemnation, will be well on the way to becoming communities which give God real space to be who God is, for our good as God's people and for the good of the world. Now, of course, I know this diocese well enough and myself well enough also to know that we do not always allow that kind of freedom for God, but I also know that we do not want to be communities where vices like hardness of heart, the harbouring of long-standing grievances, persistently bad relationships, power plays, obsession with the minutiae of our own life, shrink the space for God almost to vanishing point.

So, I suppose my valedictory words to you are – don't be like that. Rather, as St Paul might have put it, be more and more what you already are - called and loved into being by The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and sustained in that love and call by God the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

+Gregor