

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Visitation and Confirmation

I suppose these are technical terms in Canon Law, and I'm sure they have their own consequences, with various official things that the Bishop has to do when he comes to a parish. But I think they express a need, and a reality, that can be much simpler and more important.

“Come Across And Help Us!”

says a Macedonian who appears to Paul in a dream (Acts 16:9). This mysterious vision sets Paul on a western path, to the Gentile lands and the Greeks. The first thing a Bishop wants to do when he visits, is to help. We live at a greater distance from our Bishops than perhaps is really desirable. The root-word of “bishop” is the Greek “*episkopos*” which means *overseer*. His task is to survey the whole Church - his Diocese - and to be aware of its overall health and balance, to estimate its poverties and failures, to diagnose its needs and to decide on future initiatives. He must know its gifts and possibilities, its achievements and successes; and value and encourage the people who do the good work that bears fruit. When he comes on Visitation, he must do these things within a parish.

Overseeing the Diocese

There is great importance in the Bishop's awareness of his clergy. They are the ones who work in the vineyard because the Bishop has called them to do so. They have to be cared-for and nurtured so that they use all their gifts to the fullest extent. The Bishop has to lay out his resources with insight, so that the priests feel they are in the right place, and that they can make a real contribution. They have been expensively trained, and they are the Bishop's chief asset. After that there is the task of becoming aware of the state of individual parish communities. Do they work well together, is the community

happy? Do they have what they need by way of “plant” - the right buildings, proper space in which to work? Is there help they need from outside, from the Diocese or from neighbouring parishes? This surely means that he must be aware of the parish, its qualities and its people. That's why he makes a Visitation. What a task it is to be a Bishop!

You Must Confirm Your Brothers

says Jesus to St Peter at the Last Supper; and this doesn't mean the Sacrament of Confirmation, but the whole duty of *making other people strong* - by inspiring them, by encouraging their generosity, by recognizing their goodness and loving them. I don't care how formidable we may look: we all need to be supported and told we are doing something valuable. In the Church, this means something supernatural, something sacramental: the life of the Church is the sacrament of the whole world, and this is the life in which we are confirmed and encouraged by our Bishop, who is himself the essential minister of the sacraments in our Diocese. This may, of course, include being told we could do better - but that's easy to take if it means we're being watched over, and that someone sympathizes with our situation. Bishops and Popes have to do this, and that to me is summed up in the word “confirmation”.

Make It Easy For Him

We should remember that we owe our Bishop support in turn. His burdens and responsibilities are awesome, and can be killing. We have grown out of the world where figures of authority have to pretend they are made of stainless steel. Welcome him to Wollaton this week; make your prayer for him at Mass a real one.

Fr Philip