

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Planning Blight

This not very charming phrase refers to what happens when a rumour starts about dramatic new plans in an area of land. The Government thinks of building a new road, railway, power-station; immediately no-one can sell, or wants to buy, a house: worried residents put off retiling roofs, papering dining-rooms, painting doors, even planting herbaceous borders, lest a letter arrive announcing a compulsory purchase order, closely followed by a demolition squad.

Wollaton Parish

I think it would be fair to say that our parish suffers from a brand of this blight, particularly in the matter of our property. As I am reach the end of my sixth year as PP, I suppose I can be allowed the license to say that our church is not worthy of us, and that the life and activity of the parish is effectively smothered by the poverty of its premises. We are a committed and loving body of Catholics, generous and gifted with vision. We are wise enough to know that the Christian faith is not to do with possessions, power or buildings. We have shown that we can have (if I may say so) a remarkably good experience of the liturgy in a building which contributes nothing spiritual of its own. We have a musical establishment which is astonishing, and the envy of much larger communities. All true: but there is no way in which we could claim to have done the faith justice in missionary terms in our part of the City. People look at our building and wonder if anything happens there. Other parishes are different: the people of the Meadows, for instance, have built a fine, large, useful building which equips them excellently for the work of evangelisation. They have room for meeting, for conversation, for welcome and hospitality, for education, as well as for the dignified worship of God. St Pat's, of course, is a parish founded long ago, and we are not. But in the seventies they upped sticks and moved house into a featureless new estate, with great courage and faith. They did not allow the dreaded P. B. to infect them. One has to say that our parish might have been expected to do something more to express its loyalty to the faith; after all, most Wollatonians are reputedly considerably better off than the average Meadows-dweller. And there are many more Catholics here than attend our Church (as we all know). I can't commend their priorities, but I can understand them.

Brass Tacks

I don't think we are right to accept this blight on our future. I believe that we could build and maintain a decent centre of operations for ourselves and our successors; it is long overdue. But the decision to do or not to do this is really *not mine*. One thing is very clear to me: if this parish wishes to claim its right to a place in *diocesan* planning (ie in the minds of those who deploy *priests*), it might usefully make known its unwillingness to make do with inadequate and unworthy *premises* any more. As one lady succinctly put it, "I defy anyone in Wollaton to show me a lavatory in their house which is like the lavatory in our Church." I would like to put the same question about the chairs we sit on, or the kitchen which is our only means of hospitality. Our Church speaks volumes to those who visit us: the trouble is, *it tells lies*. It speaks of a neglected and inappropriate attempt at religion. That isn't what we are like. But living with mess and squalor and discomfort and inconvenience breeds a kind of brave indifference. We don't see it after a while. We have accumulated some money in the last six years; I could easily fill the place with good benches and asphalt the car-park by Christmas. Why don't I? *Planning blight!* I don't think that those steps would supply what we need; but the effort of selling the idea of a new building and getting it off the ground is so huge.

Parallel Case - Sad Story

There is a suburb not unlike ours in another city I know. Coincidentally it contains a huge and ancient park, and a small village centre with a medieval parish church and a mansion. It also, coincidentally, contains a University. It lies to the west of the City Centre, and used to be served from the city's principal parish. The decision was taken in the sixties to build a small chapel/hall, and after a while a priest was sent to create a new parish. Everything was set fair: there was room on the site for the development of a new Church, and at that time the parish contained the majority of the professional people of the City. Everyone expected positive things to happen: but they didn't. Arguments began about whether the cost of a church was justified in a starving world, there was strife about transport and Catholic schools, there was trouble in the parish council; the little hall became

unpleasantly neglected, some parishioners left in disgust, others reverted to the mother-parish, a new parish priest asked to be moved. The atmosphere was negative and divided, and the decision was taken to recall the parish priest, sell the Presbytery, and return the suburb to the mother-parish as a chapel of ease.

What Went Wrong

My own personal feeling is that the growth of that parish was frustrated by the lack of realism. Many people do not have the ability to ignore their surroundings on high principle. They need the outward signs which convey values. Church members are no exception. If they sense an atmosphere of neglect or squalor, they begin to suffer from it; if they sense reverence and dignity, or consideration and welcome, or warmth and enthusiasm, these qualities feed their response. A community that is just for its own members can take a vote on what it wants, and then everyone ought to be satisfied. The Church isn't like that. The Church is for everyone, and it must signify clearly that destiny of its mission. In medieval England this happened by the graceful and sensitive use of local stone and art-forms in the creation of the beautiful parish churches. Ours is a lonelier world: we don't have the key to such a code, in this quite different time and place. What is the *proper* form for the Church in Wollaton at the turn of the millennium? What do we need to embody the community we want to be in visible form - so that people will know we are here, and get at least a glimpse of what we stand for, in terms they can sense, and understand? Of course, a dignified space for the Liturgy comes first. But other sorts of meeting are important.

Premises for care

At the moment we can *just about* perform the Liturgy in our building - not with completeness; It isn't just that I've never felt like processing with a Cross, for instance, or that incense chokes the congregation in two minutes, or that I spend twenty minutes straightening chairs before every Baptism.. *We cannot properly hold a funeral or a wedding.* A cup of coffee after a service is a demand almost impossible to meet with respect or dignity. A meeting in the hall (using the sliders to banish the Sanctuary) is provisional because of the kneelers and the very uncomfortable chairs, the lack of a single decent table (where would we keep one?), and so on. There isn't the slightest chance of a luncheon-club for the retired, or a playgroup for pre-schools, or a youth-club for teenagers. Any social event is always going to present difficulties almost

impossible to overcome. Our one annual bazaar, or the odd fundraiser, demands exhausting major strategy. None of this encourages us to be a busy, creative community. The situation is embarrassing.

An Act of Faith

I've already mentioned the question of strategy within the Diocese. So far, simply by playing Chinese Chequers with the priests we have, the problems have been solved - only two parishes have been closed. Soon we are to have a new Bishop. He will surely take a pretty penetrating look at the appointments. I am not sure what he will see when he looks at us. Do we show signs of being the parish that we want to be or ought to be? *I don't think we even show signs of being the parish that we are.* We could be perceived as being careless, indifferent, uninspired, poor in every sense of the word. I am not talking about holy poverty; that might apply if our *homes* were as poor as our Church building. The Church's mind calls for the Liturgy to be unfolded in conditions of "noble simplicity". I don't think we reach that. My question is simply this: **do we want our community to survive into the new millennium as a fully-established parish?** It requires an act of faith, but not a stupid or blind one. We have the gifts we need to fulfil it. Or we might become a slightly more comfortable chapel of ease, in the corner of another parish. What do you think? Let me know
Fr Philip