

## Statement To Parishes of Our Lady of Lourdes, Thames Ditton and Holy Name, Esher

As some of you may already have heard, Father Rob Esdaile is leaving Our Lady of Lourdes parish at the end of May, after almost 16 years in the parish. After a three month sabbatical he will be taking up a new assignment in another parish. At the same time, Fr. David King, Parish Priest of Esher, will have completed over 10 years as a priest and this is a good point for him to undertake further studies to prepare him for his own future ministry in the Diocese. Given the falling number of clergy in active ministry, Bishop Richard will be appointing one Parish Priest to serve both Thames Ditton and Esher.

The aim is not to force a merger of the two communities. Each will retain its own identity, but now we have the opportunity to harness the gifts of each community to sustain our liturgical celebrations, our daily living out of our Catholic faith and our sharing of that faith with others. Already, this year, young people from the two parishes are preparing for Confirmation together. For several years youth groups for Year 7 students have been shared. Despite the disruption caused by Covid-19, there are plenty of opportunities to work together.

Fortunately, as well as being physically close our two parishes have a lot in common. Both have sought to develop a more 'outward-facing' attitude to ministry and mission in recent years. Each has a recently renewed leadership team and a tradition of active participation by a large number of members of the congregation. Each has a focus on welcome and creating opportunities for people to grow in faith. Both communities have been influenced by the '*Divine Renovation*' ministry of Father James Mallon and have embraced the *Alpha Course* as a tool for evangelisation. Each has a history of generously responding to social needs at home and abroad. Both are served by St. Paul's Catholic Primary School, while our secondary school pupils also study alongside each other, either at Salesian School, Chertsey or one of the other excellent secondary schools in the area.

We are also blessed with very good resources, in terms of plant, finance and personnel (both paid staff and volunteer). Working together can bring many blessings to both our communities.

From the end of May each parish will have to reduce the number of weekend masses from 3 to 2 in order to make it feasible for one priest to preside at them. But the bigger challenge is to move from a notion that the parish priest is there “to run the parish” alone to the realisation that (as St. Paul tells the Corinthians) “you together are Christ’s body, but each of you is a different part of it.” (1 Cor 12.27) Without the contribution of each of us that body is incomplete.

Few of us enjoy change, especially in the most familiar and highly valued features of our life. But the Church has always been about bringing change about because we are followers of Jesus, who proclaimed in the Synagogue at Nazareth: “The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord’s year of favour.” (Lk 4.18) And the Church has always been well-equipped to embrace change because the same Spirit continues to empower us and lead us into the fullness of Truth.

So let us pray every day for God’s blessing on the journey we are now beginning and let us set out confidently on the path our two communities will walk together in the years ahead. The Lord Jesus walks with us, as he walked with the disciples on the Road to Emmaus, As then, so now, he wishes to speak to our hearts, to explain the Scriptures to us and to lead us to recognise his presence in the breaking of bread.

Fr. Rob Esdaile

Fr. David King