



Diocese of Argyll and the Isles

Bishop's Pastoral Letter on Phase 3 of *Led by the Spirit*

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Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

When I became your bishop I chose the motto "*Make your home in me, as I make mine in you*" (John 15:4). Jesus' invitation during the Last Supper attracts me, as the years have taught that a personal relationship with the Lord is essential for a genuine and enduring faith.

Jesus describes himself as the True Vine and through this beautiful image he reveals the importance of 'abiding'. The Trinity's love flows out to us and draws us back into the divine. However, this indwelling is not a cosy, private relationship but rather we are sent out to love like Jesus, to bear fruit. The quality of our fruit depends on the quality of our relationship with God.

Communion with God, or genuine holiness, is essential. Holiness is often misunderstood. Holiness arises from an authentic loving relationship with God which flows into loving service of others. The Second Vatican Council spoke of the Universal Call to Holiness. Holiness, a personal bond with God, is for everyone!

An ancient image which I also find attractive depicts Jesus as the sun while the Church is the moon. Just as the moon reflects the sun's light so the Church has no light of her own but rather is called to reflect the light of Christ. The Church's purpose lies not in self-preservation or power but in pointing to Christ, accompanying people towards Christ.

We are living in challenging times. I believe that we must come closer to God, both as individuals and as communities. Christians who deeply love God and others will be a blessing for our families, communities, parishes and diocese. Inevitably our pointing towards Christ will be enhanced. The question however that concerns me is: *how can we grow in holiness?* We desire holiness but how can it become a reality? Argyll and the Isles has many strengths, for which I give thanks. Nonetheless, how does our diocese which is so widespread but depopulating, has many Church buildings but with fewer priests and practicing parishioners actually grow in holiness? I know that God cares for us, I do not worry about that, but we must communally discern where the Lord is leading us.

I launched *Led by the Spirit* – our Diocesan Discernment Programme – 18 months ago. My hope was for us to renew our diocesan life through greater discernment of, and compliance with, God's will. In Phase 1 we discerned that we are indeed called to holiness as well as more effective evangelisation, catechesis, formation of clergy and laity, to be more Christ-like (welcoming) and transparent.¹ In Phase 2 we reflected on our resources, the reality of our situation today. Circumstances have greatly changed and our diocese must adapt to meet our new reality.²

¹ I consider that our discernment for a more humble, reflective Church seeking reform was prophetic, especially when the recent Census revealed that most Scots see no reason to be part of a Religion.

² The reports on Phases 1 & 2 can be found at www.ledbythespirit.rcdai.org.uk

We are now beginning the third and final phase where we will be seeking concrete proposals as to how we can live our aspirations. It is important that everyone takes part and I urge you to get involved. Not only do you have the right to be heard but, through baptism, you are all – without exception - temples of the Spirit.

Communal discernment is not about debating or trying to get our own way, no matter how sincere our beliefs are. Rather discernment is seeking the voice of God. The parish gatherings will not be business meetings but a spiritual exercise. To help us discern a method called Conversation in the Spirit will be used. When your parish meets, facilitators will guide the Conversation in the Spirit. You can find out more about Conversation in the Spirit and the questions for the parish gatherings at the Phase 3 section of www.ledbythespirit.rcdai.org.uk as well as information about possibilities for lay involvement and structures within the Church.³

Parish gatherings can commence from July onwards which gives you time to first read the material and for prayer. As previously, parish submissions will be collated which will help me reach decisions for the future of our diocese.⁴

When this process began I stated that nothing, unless it was against Church teaching⁵, was off the table. I fully appreciate that this discernment process will have its challenges. Some potential solutions may be painful. I encourage honest, bold and open sharing and listening but always in a respectful manner. Before you speak please ask yourself, “In what way will my contribution or suggestion make the diocese more missionary, help us to become holier?”

I publish this letter on the Feast of St Columba. It has struck me that the influence of Columba endured for centuries after his death. This could not have happened due to his personal holiness alone because his influence would have faded over time. No, the Columban family maintained their positive influence precisely because so many others, throughout successive generations, also lived holy lives – responded to Christ’s invitation to be joined to the True Vine - and so bore abundant fruit. The Church’s mission is always to point to Christ and we do this best when we ourselves are close to him. This is what I pray for our diocese today. We must now discern how, in today’s situation, we can grow closer to God and so faithfully fulfil our divinely given mission.

Yours in Christ,



Right Reverend Brian McGee
Bishop of Argyll and the Isles

³ Baptism was our first Sacrament and through it we share equally in the life and mission of Christ, although we do so in different ways. The laity are not being asked to become more involved in Church life primarily to ‘help the priest’ (although this is important) but because, through baptism, it is their right and duty. Nor does our present focus on ecclesial participation deny the unique importance of lay witness in the world, a dimension which can be so easily overlooked.

⁴ Parish submissions should be received by 30th September 2024.

⁵ Genuine reform must have continuity with the tradition.