

Bishop Pat Lynch's Visitation to Christchurch, Eltham

Date: March 10th, 11th, 12th. 2017.

Introduction. The parish of Christchurch in Eltham is situated in the Greenwich deanery and is bordered by the parishes of Mottingham, Eltham Well Hall and Blackfen. It was founded in 1870 by the Canons Regular and the present church was completed in 1912. Their presence and their ministry is greatly appreciated by parishioners but also by the priests in nearby parishes. I would like to thank them especially for the practical and spiritual support they have given to the local clergy for many years.

The parish of Christchurch is one of the largest parishes in the Greenwich deanery and has two excellent Catholic schools – St. Thomas More Secondary School and St. Mary's Primary School. The combined weekly Sunday mass attendance at the four Sunday masses (6.00pm Saturday, 9.30am, 11.30am and 6.30pm on Sundays) averages over 1,000 people and has done so for many years. The parish complex includes a beautifully designed church that has a capacity for 500 people, parish offices and meeting rooms, a community residence (the Priory) for the Canons, a magnificent parish hall and a spacious garden which includes a small graveyard.

Eltham is an area with a wide range of housing provision including privately owned houses and flats, rented accommodation as well as some social housing. It was and still is very common to see three generations of the same family living in Eltham. For many years the demographic profile of the parish consisted mainly of families of British and Irish background. In recent years this has begun to change and now a growing percentage of parishioners of Christchurch are from many different parts of the world eg Eastern Europe, Africa, Portugal, Brazil, Sri Lanka and even China. The arrival of many young couples and families is, therefore, changing the demographic profile of both the parish and the schools.

Christchurch is a very vibrant and well organised parish with a strong tradition of participation of the laity. There is a finance committee which oversees the financial administration of the parish, a hall management committee which looks after the management of the hall as well as an administration committee which oversees and updates the administration processes and procedures in the parish. The parish has an excellent web site which is being updated at the present time. This enables people to access information about the parish very easily.

The Sisters of Mercy have had a long and fruitful association with Eltham ever since 1880 and their presence and witness is much appreciated by parishioners young and old. For many years the Sister ran a special school for girls the site of which has now become St. Mary's Primary School. The Associates of the Mercy Sisters meet regularly for prayer on the 1st Friday of every month and the sisters are involved in a variety of ministries in the parish and in St. Thomas More Secondary School.

Worship and Prayer: Parishioners at Christchurch are involved in many ways in the preparation and the celebration of the Sunday Liturgy ie as readers, ushers, extra-ordinary ministers of the Eucharist and as altar servers but also as sacristans, flower arrangers, church cleaners and brass cleaners. The children's liturgy group has been very instrumental in the success of the weekly children's mass at 9.30am on Sunday. The parish is also blessed to have so many people involved in the different music groups (the children's choir, the Chamber choir, Christchurch singers) thus providing a very rich and diverse musical tradition in the parish.

The parish also provides many other opportunities for prayer and worship not just during Lent and Advent but throughout the year. Aside from praying the traditional devotions like the Rosary and the Stations of the Cross people gather for Eucharistic Adoration and there are a variety of groups who meet for prayer and reflection on the Scriptures eg Fathers' Prayers, Mothers Prayers, the Emmaus Group.

Formation in Faith. The parish of Christchurch is blessed with two excellent schools – St. Mary's Primary School and St. Thomas more Secondary School. The preparation programmes for Baptism, First Communion and Confirmation function very well due primarily to good organisation, good support from the clergy and the dedication of a large group of catechists. The number of children presented for Baptism varies but is usually over eighty every year. The number for First Communion this year is about the same and in recent years the number for Confirmation has been over seventy making it necessary to have two celebrations of the sacrament every year. The R.C. I.A. functions very well and through it a number of adults are prepared for sacramental initiation every year.

Reaching out in Mission. The care for sick and housebound parishioners given by the clergy and laity of the parish is excellent. A number of parishioners give their time and bring the Blessed Sacrament regularly to a large number of sick and housebound parishioners. There is a very active group of the St. Vincent de Paul Society which supports the elderly, the housebound and the disadvantaged in all kinds of practical ways. There is also an active presidium of the Legion of Mary as well as an active Women's Association and Ascent Group. Inclusion of people with disabilities and the protection of children and vulnerable adults is taken very seriously and the appropriate structures and procedures are all in place.

Parishioners are very generous in the support they give to a number of charities in the Church and in the local area eg CAFOD, Missio, the H.C.P.T., charities supported the Knights of St. Columba. The support given to the parish project in Santo Domingo is especially noteworthy.

Resources: human, financial and material. Parishioners at Christchurch have a strong sense of ownership of the buildings and fabric of the parish. There is a very efficient finance committee in place which oversees the parish finances. The newly refurbished hall has been a great asset to the parish and indeed to the local community and is well maintained and administered. Likewise the fabric of the buildings – the church, the hall and the priory – are all well maintained. Parishioners give generously in the weekly collection and the amount raised through gift aid is excellent. One of the ongoing challenges, however, as in every large parish is to make contact with and involve newly arrived families in the planned giving and gift aid programmes.

Conclusion. Christchurch is a large and very well organised parish and parishioners have a very strong sense of belonging to and ownership of the parish and as a result are very generous with their time, their gifts and their money. Many parishioners generously give their time helping to prepare the Liturgy, helping to prepare people for the sacraments and helping the parish to reach out to others especially those who are most vulnerable. Continuing to discern, continuing to call and form and continuing to sustain so many lay people in their ministries in such a large dynamic parish will always be an ongoing challenge. Fr. John is very good at recognizing people's gifts and talents and his open and welcoming approach forms the foundation for this strong sense of lay participation. **The one suggestion I would make is that considering the huge amount of work that Fr. John does in the parish it would be worthwhile reflecting on whether now is the time to see if there is a suitable parishioner who might be called to the ministry of the diaconate.** Finally, I extend my gratitude and that of the Archdiocese to Fr. John and indeed all

the Canons who have contributed in any way in any way to make the parish of Christchurch the excellent parish that is.