

DIOCESE OF BRENTWOOD

Parish of The Holy Spirit, Great Bardfield & The English Martyrs, Thaxted, Essex

("Parish of Great Bardfield and Thaxted")

Introduction

Over the past few months each Parish in the Diocese of Brentwood (the "**Brentwood Diocese**") has been invited to contribute to a renewed initiative led by His Excellency Bishop Alan Williams to discuss, reflect upon and consider, through individual and collective prayer, the ways in which the Catholic Church can most effectively continue to disseminate and evangelise the teaching of our Lord in the Brentwood Diocese.

As members of the Parish of Great Bardfield and Thaxted, this has necessarily led to an examination of how this can be achieved in the various parishes and local communities of Essex, specifically the more rural parts of North Essex, taking into account the challenges faced by the Brentwood Diocese as a whole.

Parish of Great Bardfield and Thaxted

Reflecting on our Parish, the visible reality is that the Catholic faith remains strong and there is a substantial and very clear support among our parishioners towards ensuring the continuance of the effective provision & promotion of evangelization and worship for the benefit of our constituent communities across all generations.

We have been grateful, in the recent past, to benefit from the commitment and community involvement of retired priests who have been willing to reside and celebrate Mass within our active parish community.

It is also worthy to note that, in the past several years, our parish has seen numbers grow - particularly among those adult generations that now support young families who appreciate the vibrancy of the Mass we are able to celebrate through the significant commitment of our parishioners to hosting Childrens' Liturgy, promoting youth involvement and music.

Many months prior to the request from the Brentwood Diocese (in fact 2 years ago), in an initiative led by our current priest, Father Richard Rowe, our parish formed the '*Ginger Group*' – a parishioner-led group formed under the guidance of Fr. Richard, keen to meet regularly, discuss, seek guidance through prayer and formulate ideas around the effective and sustainable continuance of Catholic worship in our Parish.

As a Parish, through a sustained and open swapping of ideas (both at a macro- and micro-level) about our future within the Brentwood Diocese and continued prayer, we are confident and positive about this current review process and the results it will bring – helping us collectively to strengthen our Catholic community and faith in the most workable way with the blessing of our Bishop.

Diocesan Draft Working Paper 2017

Reference is made to the '*Brentwood Diocese Draft Working Paper*' released in Summer 2017 (the "**Brentwood Working Paper 2017**").

The contents of the Brentwood Working Paper 2017 are informative and our parishioners have taken great interest in spending time to reflect and discuss it. The ongoing challenge that the Brentwood Diocese faces is clear and requires a careful examination and assessment of how we are to balance:

- (A) the continuance of local community worship through the maintenance of smaller parishes;
- (B) the decrease, and expected continued decrease, of available clergy;
- (C) the need to provide suitable support to those existing larger parishes within the Brentwood Diocese (often parishes that have hospitals and Catholic schooling provision in close proximity).

With those priorities in mind we have sought to formulate our proposal for our parish and its continued subsistence within the Brentwood Diocese.

Our Formal Parish Proposal (FPP)

We set out below our proposal for the Parish of Great Bardfield and Thaxted for further consideration by the Brentwood Diocese. It is split into three proposed, potentially malleable, but foreseeable time periods.

(A) Short Term

1. We remain a vibrant Catholic community and enjoy regular weekday and weekend worship. Our numbers at Mass, most certainly on Sundays, Holy Days and other celebratory days in the Liturgical Calendar, are consistent and growing.
2. We are blessed to have an active Priest in Charge in the parish and our hope in the short term, at least for as long as Fr. Richard is willing, well enough, and feels strong and able to continue to serve our Parish, is that we can maintain our current position as a separate Parish serving the Catholic communities of Great Bardfield and Thaxted (and surrounding areas).
3. We will sustain some short-term funding obligations to maintain and sustain our Parish buildings in order to fulfil our short-term goals and comply with any already known, or arising, Health & Safety/ Fire Regulations /legislative requirements - these are under active consideration, have the support and available funding of the Parish Council and therefore present no immediate issue to the Brentwood Diocese.
4. Our Parish Council and our parishioners remain committed to sustaining and maintaining a local place of worship for Great Bardfield and Thaxted parishioners, and are taking steps to endorse and renew our collective commitment to the parish community, at whose heart is devotion to the Holy Mass that is vibrant, embraces childrens' liturgy, encourages adult and family fellowship and stimulates and informs the development of our Catholic community.
5. We have included within the Short Term strategic planning an option, for further consideration, whereby the parish attempts already to reduce the workload on Fr Richard, who is already past his formal retirement age of 75, so as to improve the sustainability of his priestly service. This is even more sensitive now that Fr Martin's absence on long term convalescence and recuperation is being covered by Fr Richard saying a Saturday evening Sunday vigil Mass at Great Dunmow.
6. One suggestion is to rationalize weekend services into *one* Sunday Mass at *one* location. One advantage of such a measure is to attempt to draw the parish community closer together in worship, which will serve us well as we face the uncertainties of future change.
7. We remain committed to the approach set out above in the short to medium term (hopefully, the next 3-5 years, maybe beyond), provided we can remain self-sustaining with a Parish Priest allocation (including a resident or non-resident retired Priest) and Parish funding.
8. We would ask the Brentwood Diocese to support the approach being taken by the Parish Council that is set out above in the short to medium term.

(B) Medium Term

1. We have land and buildings to support and maintain a retired priest (or priests) at The Church of the Holy Spirit in Great Bardfield. **NB:** Fr Richard does not currently need to use these facilities but that is due to his own personal circumstances of having a property in Thaxted.
2. The residential premises on the ground floor of the church premises (the presbytery apartment) is not utilised at present and would benefit from some upgrading. However the apartment is spacious and the upgrading cost would not be very significant if they were to be taken into account alongside an ability to continue meaningful Catholic activities and Mass at Great Bardfield for the benefit of the Parish of Great Bardfield and Thaxted (and other surrounding areas of North Essex in the future).
3. This is an '*open*' option that we would like to consider and discuss further at such time as consideration turns to look at future suitable economic investment into the maintenance of more rural parishes that will in the future continue to hold demographic significance within the Brentwood Diocese (or any successor thereof).

RESPONSE TO REQUEST FOR PARISH PROPOSALS: Formal Parish Proposal Draft v1

4. We could imagine such uses of the buildings at Great Bardfield, if not for a resident, active, full-time assigned parish priest (which we accept is unlikely given the demographics), might include one or more of the following four options, abbreviated as **‘the Five Rs’**:
 - a) **‘Rooky’**: a first parish for a newly ordained and dynamic novice priest, seeking to gain experience and find his feet. Best do this in a parish that is not overly demanding, but which will nevertheless stretch him in its geographic footprint, spread and variety of needs, and help him grow, develop and mature.
 - b) **‘Roster’**: an occasional weekend ‘bolt-hole’ served by peripatetic priests, which could be managed on a roster basis for diocesan clergy, meeting the parish needs on a scheduled Rota basis over the church calendar year, eg 4 priests visiting once a month for the weekend, or alternatively perhaps 12 priests visiting on a seasonal quarterly basis.
 - c) **‘Rotation’**: a temporary location for priests, similar to being on sabbatical, whereby they do a stint at our parish as parish priest of between one and two years perhaps, with a pre-determined move-on date, to better pace their priestly careers and manage the energy and stamina required for their long-haul ministry, and to mitigate against the risk of pastoral ‘burn out’.
 - d) **‘Retreat’**: a temporary retreat apartment for clergy, offered to priests by the Bishop on an ‘as needs’ basis, offering a quiet, attractive, secluded rural village location to re-charge and/or alleviate the many stresses of urban priestly life, where the vibrant and caring parish community in many ways are welcoming and actually largely autonomous, being mainly self-organising and self-sufficient. Great Barfield would therefore function as an oasis of calm and peace at which priests could recharge their batteries. and return to their basis home parishes revitalized and refreshed.
 - e) **‘Retirement’**: a permanent home for retirement-age priest(s), assigned with lighter parish duties, as now, and as in previous years.
5. The adjoining premises, the House of Our Lady, is similarly in need of major repair and refurbishment, but could be either treated as part of the Medium Term plan for the parish offering accommodation options of mutual interest to both our parish and the care-of-priests throughout the diocese. Or it could be segregated and rented out for its income.

(C) Long Term

1. We have also discussed on a longer-term basis the establishment of a so-called ‘Super Parish’, whereby a new church, with parish hall facilities, and a new Catholic or associated Catholic school can be situated at a suitable edge of town site, whether that be Saffron Walden and/or Great Dunmow, or elsewhere within parishioner ‘commuting’ range.
2. Many house building programmes are anticipated in the areas around Great Dunmow, Braintree and Saffron Walden.
3. Our parishioners are open to the possibility of moving to or ‘merging’ with another parish to the extent that is the result of the consultation of the Brentwood Diocese for the longer term. Flexibility and change are certainly concepts that the younger Catholic generations are more willing to accept. This does, however, present real difficulties for the older members of more rural Catholic parish communities that wish to be part of a Catholic community (in fact rely on it) and attend Mass. We assume these considerations and the availability of pooled or Church-provided transport will be taken into account.
4. We can’t be sure yet how these proposed plans will unfold. However, we need to keep our close eye on them and our strategic opportunities and priorities over the next 5-10 years to ensure that our current “rural” Catholic parishes are not prejudiced, unnecessarily or too early.
5. Whatever the longer term plans are, we must and will willingly accept that, faced with this uncertainty and development, members of our Parish may choose to go elsewhere in furtherance of their faith and worship at this time or at any point in the future, or even lapse.

Conclusion

- (A) We are a parish that has grown and developed over time.
- (B) We are grateful for the allocation of retired priests to help us in our continuance of local worship.
- (C) We accept and welcome the need for change.
- (D) We would like to retain the ‘*status quo*’ for as long as we can whilst we have the benefit of our local ability and a committed priest in Fr Richard to do so.
- (E) We remain open to future options, and we would sincerely hope that, when that time comes (with the benefit of all we know at that future point), we can meaningfully discuss the viability of the Medium Term options we hereby propose (The Five Rs), and/or any other creative options coming from Brentwood which we have not yet considered which support the continuation of existing parish communities and parish life.
- (F) Similarly, our approach towards long term options we have set out above is flexible and creative.
- (G) And finally, we would hope that by then strides will have been made within Church thinking and Canon Law in the application to ways of sacramental worship of radical new paradigm shifts, especially with respect to the effect digitalization has on ways of communicating, organizing and nurturing relationships within families and communities, which enhance rather than compromise, Christian living and the pursuit of personal and collective sanctity.

Things may have changed!

PARISH OF GREAT BARDFIELD AND THAXTED

3rd October 2017