



**DIOCESE OF LEEDS**

## **PASTORAL LETTER**

Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2016

### **Sacramental Preparation for First Holy Communion and Confirmation & The Provision of Youth Services**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ

Since my ordination as Bishop in November 2014, a number of strategic issues facing the Diocese of Leeds needed to be reviewed. Among these were questions concerning the age at which our young people receive the Sacrament of Confirmation and the future provision of our Youth Services. Both of these subjects provide challenges and opportunities; they are related also to each other within the mission of Catholic education and the work of evangelisation. I have given careful thought and prayer to these matters and I now wish to share with you the direction in which I wish to lead our diocese.

My overall vision for the formation of the Catholic children and young people in the diocese is, I hope, simple and clear. In the primary years of education we should try to help our children learn to know the person of Our Lord Jesus Christ, to listen to and speak to Him in prayer, and to develop a personal loving relationship with Him.

In the secondary years of education, and in the higher education we offer through our sixth-form provision and through Leeds Trinity University, we should try to: deepen the faith and relationship of our young people with Our Lord Jesus Christ; integrate our young people into the life of the local and universal Church; form our young people in the Christian virtues which will build character and inspire the leaders among them; and, help our young people to grow in discipleship and learn how to put their faith into action through serving Christ in others, in the Church, and in the world around them.

Knowing and loving Our Lord Jesus Christ, accepting the graces he freely gives to us in the Sacraments of the Church, and understanding how faith in Him can make a real impact for good in our lives and in the society in which we live, is at the centre of the Church's mission in education. It is this vision which I wish to see at the heart of the strategy for the future provision of Catholic education and youth services within the Diocese of Leeds.

During my visitations to schools and parishes over the past eighteen months, I have met with clergy, headteachers, and the chairpersons of school governing bodies and academy councils. I have discussed with them two important issues: the preparation of our children and young people for the Sacrament of Confirmation and the provision of youth services. It is these two matters which I now wish to address.

### **The Sacrament of Confirmation**

It is a cause of concern to me that in the Diocese of Leeds a large proportion of those who are baptised into the Catholic Church (68%) and make their first Holy Communion (58%) do not receive also the Sacrament of Confirmation. This means that we are failing, as a diocesan family, to complete the initiation into the Catholic Faith of a considerable number of our children and young people. Such a failure deprives many of our young people of the objective grace of the Sacrament of Confirmation; the spiritual gift which provides the vital help they need in their young and adult lives.

I have decided therefore to change the age at which the Sacrament of Confirmation is conferred from the age of 14 to 11; that is, from school year 9 to year 6, the last year of primary education. This, I believe, will enable us to focus on and provide a more integral preparation and celebration of the sacraments of initiation within the primary years of education. In the secondary years of education, the focus will be on how those who are joined to Christ in His Church live out their faith and give witness to their faith through vocation and service in the world around them.

Further detailed information on how this change will affect the preparation for and celebration of First Sacraments in our parishes and schools, and the timetable for the implementation of the change, has been provided by the Vicariate for Education in Appendix A to this Pastoral Letter.

### **Youth Service Provision**

The future of Youth Service provision in the diocese is linked to this change of focus in secondary education. Looking ahead, youth services will be developed in such a way that there will be a greater collaboration between the Diocesan Youth Service, school clergy and lay chaplains, parish and deanery catechists, and other partners. The aim of this collaboration will be to develop and build a service which fosters within our young people the desire to deepen their knowledge and love of Our Lord Jesus Christ and to serve Him in other people and the world around them.

Above all, it will be important to ensure that the catechesis and religious education we offer our young people provides them with a rich knowledge and understanding of their Catholic faith, the desire to live their faith, and the passion to promote their faith.

It is important that we develop a Youth Service that will help to build the capacity for youth ministry to be formed and sustained at a local level and to increase the opportunities for young people to become engaged in the life and mission of the local Catholic community.

In partnership with parish, school and home, the Diocesan Youth Service will promote and support school and parish/deanery based mission and retreat programmes delivered locally for and with young people.

The Youth Service will continue to encourage the participation of our young people in the annual Diocesan Pilgrimage to Lourdes and at World Youth Day; it will also focus on how these events are followed-up and how contact is maintained with the young people who have taken part in them.

Working with schools, sixth form college and parishes, the Youth Service will identify and co-ordinate opportunities for our young people to understand how their faith can make a real difference for the good in the world around them and to use their personal interests, skills and talents in the service of Christ and His Church.

More information on the strategy for the future provision of Youth Services within the diocese is given in Appendix B to this Pastoral Letter. Copies of this letter and its two appendices will be available on the diocesan website.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I commend these changes to you. Ahead there will be challenges but also great opportunities. Together let us do all we can to serve the children and young people in our diocese and to proclaim our faith in Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to those around us.

Please pray for all our Catholic schools, for our teachers and parish catechists, and for me your bishop.

Assuring you of my prayers and every blessing, I remain

Your servant in the Lord



✠ Marcus Stock

Bishop of Leeds

*Given at Leeds on the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2016 and appointed to be read in all Churches and Chapels of the Diocese on the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> September 2016.*