

Closing Visitation Report for the Oxford North Deanery. November 2025 – April 2026

At this closing gathering of the programme of visitations across the Oxford South Deanery, Archbishop Bernard and I would like to express our gratitude to all the clergy and parishioners of the Deanery, to those who attended the Opening Meeting at Our Lady Help of Christians, Cowley last October, those who put such preparation into the weekend visitations, which the Archbishop and I found most enjoyable and informative and to those of you who have come this evening to reflect on the process, to pray together, and to continue our mission as pilgrims of hope.

During the visitation process, Archbishop Bernard visited:

The Parish of St. Joseph, Carterton with St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More, Burford
St. Anthony of Padua, Oxford
And Our Lady and St. Hugh, Witney

And I visited:

Copus Christi, Headington with Our Lady of Lourdes, Wheatley
St. Thomas More, Kidlington with St. Hugh of Lincoln, Woodstock
St. Gregory and St. Augustine, Oxford
St. Edmund of Abingdon and St. Frideswide
Our Lady Help of Christians, Cowley with Sacred Heart, Blackbird Leys
The Oxford Oratory Church of St. Aloysius Gonzaga
St. Peter's, Eynsham
and Blessed Dominic Barberi, Littlemore

I also had the pleasure of a day's visit to Blackfriars Hall in Oxford, and I am grateful to Fr. Dominic and the community for their kind welcome.

Since the time of the Visitation, Holy Trinity, Chipping Norton with St. Therese of Lisieux, Charlbury have joined the deanery but did not form part of the Visitation.

Just to be clear, this is usually the balance of visitations between the Archbishop and an Auxiliary Bishop responsible for an area, given that there are visitations taking place in other deaneries of the Archdiocese at the same time, and Archbishop Bernard also visits some parishes in those deaneries. Each parish has now received written feedback following the weekend visitation, and I apologise that this has taken some time.

To begin I would like to thank the Dean of the Deanery, Canon Mervyn Tower for his leadership of the Deanery and pastoral care of the clergy, over now rather a long period of time.

The first thing to note about the visitation, which was evident everywhere we visited, was your appreciation for your priests and deacons, both as people, but especially as leaders, teachers of the faith, preachers of the Word of God and custodians of the Sacraments. Perhaps we could show our appreciation for them now.

I would also like to express our gratitude to the Religious Orders of Sisters and Brothers in this Deanery and to the Religious Communities. Oxford is a part of the Archdiocese uniquely blessed with the presence of so many religious, who add so much to this Deanery and our Archdiocese with their presence and witness.

Safeguarding is an area of our life and ministry that has developed in all of our parishes and communities over the past 10 years or so. The role of a Parish Safeguarding Representative is significant, processing DBS documentation, and raising the profile of a culture of safeguarding. Thank you for all that is involved and for all of the ways in which Safeguarding is now seen not so much as dealing with issues or responding to a crisis, but something that runs through all of our activities and continues to make our parish communities a safe place for everyone.

Perhaps it would be helpful if I gathered my reflections from the visitation programme under the four themes of the Diocesan Vision, as I did when I preached at all your Masses. Of the nature of the themes and my reflections, of course, some things will fall under more than one theme.

Firstly, the theme of **EVANGELISATION**

There are many signs across the Deanery of what has been termed the ‘quiet revival’, a renewed enthusiasm for and interest in the faith, especially among young people; in particular among young men. The question of course then arises whether we are ready and equipped as parishes to welcome those who have arrived with faith questions that have arisen from their own research. My visits would suggest that, in many ways, we are, but there is always more that could be done and different approaches that could be taken.

It has been very noticeable to me the number of active parishioners who have come to faith through programmes like Alpha, RCIA, Sycamore, parish missions as well as programmes designed and run by parishes. To become a Catholic and then to become an active member of a parish is something to which we aspire to lead people.

We welcome, of course, the many children who come to knowledge of the faith in our schools and in the parish programmes, and it has been a joy for me to visit the schools and to celebrate the sacraments with them, in particular the sacrament of Confirmation.

Next, the theme of **FORMATION**

The relationship between our church and school communities, and the involvement of our clergy and parishioners in the life of our schools is very much a strength, and something to continue building upon as we face challenges that include the process of academisation, of a variety of situations regarding numbers of Catholic children in our schools, the challenge of recruiting Catholic staff for our schools and acknowledging the gift of Catholic education as an act of evangelisation in the communities and neighbourhoods that our schools serve.

Across the deanery there are priests and deacons and lay people who serve faithfully as chaplains and in chaplaincies in hospitals, prisons and secondary schools and universities as well being involved in catechesis in our parishes.

The Called and Gifted programme, helping lay people to discern their God given gifts and enabling them to put those gifts at the service of others is something that is beginning to be used in the deanery, to significant effect.

And then the area of **LITURGY AND WORSHIP**

Opportunities for prayer: the celebration of Mass, Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, Rosary, prayer groups and the devotions which are often led by parishioners are manifested across the deanery in a variety of styles of worship and are well attended and appreciated. The number of people attending Mass is, in many cases, very encouraging and fills our churches a number of times each weekend.

In many parishes there is a fine tradition of serving at the altar, which continues to attract many young and not so young people. This ministry is appreciated in our parishes; it gives dignity to our liturgical celebrations, it forms young people in the faith and is increasingly something that adults are willing to do.

The ministries of the proclamation of the Word of God at Sunday Mass; extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, Children's Liturgy of the Word; music ministry and the ministry of welcome to Sunday Mass are well established in the deanery. The quality of these functions, which are fulfilled in the name of the parish, the care that is taken over them, and the continued reflection on these roles and how they can always be improved is something important to keep in mind.

The visits to sick and housebound parishioners, to which I was invited, were a privileged moment to listen to something of the history of the parishes through those who have given so much to them over the years and still pray for them. I thank the clergy for the value they place on visiting sick parishioners, assisted by Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion. Keeping in mind those who might be lonely or isolated through being housebound or ill, is something that is the concern of the whole parish community and I

believe there will always be opportunities for parishioners to visit those who are sick and housebound.

The theme of **CHARITY AND SOCIAL OUTREACH** is evident throughout the deanery and I would like to acknowledge all those engaged in this valuable work.

The work of the SVP, Foodbanks and other charitable organisations are a ready way for parishioners to show love of the neighbour alongside whom they are living, and it is encouraging to see so many examples of this social expression of the Gospel to those in need being lived out across the Deanery.

It is always humbling to see the willingness of people, sometimes people who do not have much themselves, to work towards the wellbeing of those less fortunate.

Our schools, too, are at the forefront of this social outreach in the name of the compassion of Jesus.

And so on to **CHALLENGES**

All of the parishes across the deanery display the attendance of a wide variety of people from different backgrounds and ethnicities. You only have to look around the weekend Mass congregations to see the wonderful breadth and diversity in our parishes. We still have an annual multicultural Mass in our diocese and in some parishes, and yet one could say that all of our Masses are multicultural. I would encourage you to consider how this wonderful dynamic can be reflected in our prayer and worship. What is the experience of people from different cultures and backgrounds coming to Mass week by week? Is there room for more diversity of music, for occasional readings or prayers in different languages, (with translation provided). The experience of worship that embraces the traditions of those far from home can enhance our sense of being part of a universal church.

Regarding the question of Clusters of parishes, in almost every parish we visited during the course of the visitation process, there was a concern about what is proposed by way of groupings of parishes and possible merging of parishes, and the visitation gave us the opportunity to address some of those fears. With the future decrease in the number of clergy that we know is coming, there is an ever-greater need for parishes to become used to working together and pooling resources, for the setting up of joint projects and programmes across parish boundaries and within clusters. Where situations have been built up over a number of years and are strong, there is no need to be concerned about the future. Change, from a perspective of strength, is nothing to fear. And strength in some places is something that the common good requires us to share with neighbouring parishes. The impact of these changes is yet to be felt, to a large degree, in Oxford because of the presence of priests in the city to help with supply, but in due course this deanery will be affected. Indeed, when Kidlington was without a priest for a

few months earlier in the year, it was difficult for Canon Mervyn to find sufficient priests to cover the Masses. There are priests who will retire or move in the near future who are unlikely to be replaced. We need to prepare for this now by working together constructively rather than waiting until it happens and having to manage a difficult situation.

When discussion took place in parish meetings about these matters, the information was not received with some concern but not with surprise. There was, however, a sense of willingness to adapt and support, conscious of the need to ensure that the priests available for service should not be overburdened to their own detriment.

The future shape of our parishes will look different. This is necessary. And as we look to work together as groups of parishes, or for parishes to be merged with each other, the clergy of the deanery will involve you, the parishioners, more and more in these discussions. This will include the sharing of ideas between parishes, learning about the strengths of others and the common challenges. It must move from being an idea of working together with mutual support to something that is real, and we encourage the clergy to take a lead on this, and for parishioners to support with prayer and involvement as appropriate.

Our prayer for vocations to the priesthood especially within our parishes, our families, our schools and our churches, is especially important. In this Pontificate of Pope Leo, and at a time of perhaps springtime in the Church, let us seize the moment and really believe that priests and deacons and Religious can arise from among our parish communities, our schools, and especially our own families.

This deanery is unmistakably missionary territory. We are served by the priests and religious from many parts of the world, many of whom have made great sacrifices to be far from their homes and their families to serve the English mission. We are profoundly grateful for their presence among us, and we should never take for granted the blessings they bring to us.

We also need to recognise that the questions of Digital and Social Media, as a means of both communication and evangelisation, are something that is relevant to all our lives. This may not be a strength of some of us, it isn't one of mine and may not be of your parish clergy, but it may be a strength of some of our parishioners who may be willing to venture into this area, with the support of clergy.

Pope Francis affirmed that, *“digital culture constitutes a crucial dimension of the Church’s witness in contemporary culture and an emerging missionary field”*.

And Pope Leo has likewise emphasized that, *“we need to discern how to use digital platforms to evangelize, to form communities and to challenge the false gods of consumerism, power and self-sufficiency”*.

If you do not already subscribe to it, I would like to recommend to you the weekly Diocesan Newsletter. All you need to do is go to the Archdiocese of Birmingham website; scroll down to the bottom of the homepage and click on the link that says: Subscribe to our newsletter. It comes out every Thursday.

We would like to express our gratitude to you as parish communities for your response so far to the Planned Giving Campaign where this has been run, which has linked financial giving with encouragement to give time and God-given talents and skills for the building of the Kingdom of God, through the life of your parish.

In most parishes, there is sense that we could always do with more people involved in parish life, and I'd like to suggest to you a way that this can be done:

We'd like to just give you a list of charities and organisations that would dearly love to have a link person in each parish, so that the problem of an avalanche of materials for every charity arriving with the Parish Priest, and some getting more attention than others, can find a more fruitful outcome for the charities:

Missio – Red Boxes for overseas evangelisation
Stella Maris (formerly Apostleship of the Sea)
CAFOD
Aid to the Church in Need
Friends of the Holy Land
LIFE
SVP
Mary's Meals

And some of our own Diocesan organisations and charities:

Clergy Training Fund
Kenelm Youth Trust
Johnson Association (supporting our retired priests)
Fr Hudson's Caritas
to name but a few.

If you are interested in being a link with any of these charities or interests, please approach them directly, or speak with your Parish Priest, Deacon or Parish Administrator, who can point you in the right direction.

May I finish by once again thanking everyone for their involvement and assistance in the visitation process. I am grateful for everything that has been done to make this process possible and valuable.