

Fr Billing steps down after a record 13 years as Bishop's Secretary



Though filled with many emotions as I leave my post later today as Bishop's Secretary in this my native Diocese which I love so much, my main emotion is one of **thanksgiving**. As I reflect on what the Lord has done for me – and I hope through me - for me these past thirteen years as Bishop's Secretary (to three successive bishops) - with all the other diocesan roles I have held - I have so many reasons to be grateful. I think it's a record long term for a Bishop's Secretary in this Diocese but more than that I hope its record of meeting and working with so many wonderful people rich in faith and service to the Lord - in and beyond the Diocese of Lancaster!



Upon my priestly ordination in Blackpool in 2001, after some further studies, I was appointed to Kendal and then to St Maria Goretti, Preston. When I was later asked by Bishop O'Donoghue to become his secretary (initially for 2/3 days), I was, of course, aware there had not been a priest secretary for a couple of years in the Diocese at that point so I was 'thrown in at the deep end' learning so much 'on the job' from Bishop Patrick whilst we were constantly 'on the move' in and around the Diocese. Somehow, I continued to be helped by God's promise in this hidden ministry;

that the Spirit of the Lord, a Spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel and strength shall rest upon us to lead, comfort and to guide us.

I became Bishop's Secretary just a short time before the taxing Diocesan Review of Finance and Property and became Secretary to the Trustees in its immediate aftermath and for the reforms which followed – so this was the first of many challenging moments. Another was the 18 month *Fit for Mission* review – a process of prayer and consultation about discerning the kind of Church that God is calling us to be. I was Secretary of this process which involved a lot of meetings and much paperwork. Its inevitable ramifications for parish reconfiguration will surely continue to be rolled out in the months and years to come.



As I look back, I was able to oversee for Bishop Campbell, the establishment of a new and simpler Bishop's House and to set up modest systems there to ensure its success as a home to the Bishop which also serves the needs of the Diocese. Meanwhile, I am pleased to leave a Bishop's Office which is a happy, collaborative team that operates with great efficiency and is responsive to all correspondence - with the normative use of email (there is little post now!) in our office systems. Besides, we have toiled hard to develop a comprehensive system of sound filing and record-keeping.

I'm delighted, too, to have been Communications Officer for the Diocese. For the last 10 years I have been responsible for building and running our popular, comprehensive and attractive diocesan website: www.lancasterdiocese.org.uk - linked to our active diocesan Twitter and Facebook accounts. Our website is updated every day – particularly our Latest News and Views page which is well-known. Particularly popular at home and abroad is our *Bishop's Blog* which Bishop Swarbrick has indicated will continue very shortly!

Of course, there has been the important work for Bishop Campbell to bring in increased numbers of priests from overseas to sustain our parishes and in this aspect to negotiate, too, with Religious Congregations from overseas – these courageous moves have undoubtedly secured Ladywell Shrine and saved the Listed St Walburge's and English Martyrs churches in Preston as well as St Ignatius, Preston (now the Cathedral of St Alphonsa) for the Syro-Malabar Eparchy of Great Britain which we were blessed to assist in its establishment with the Major Archbishop and the Holy See. All of these initiatives – and the women and men religious who have left home a long

way away to be with us - continue to rely on the kindness and support of our local priests and people in order to survive and flourish.



In addition, throughout these thirteen years, the Lord has blessed me with a valuable network of friendship and support in wonderful bishops, priests, religious and lay people our own Diocese but also from our Sister Syro-Malabar Eparchy for Great Britain (with its seat in Preston), elsewhere among England and Wales, in Ireland and beyond (here I'm thinking particularly of India, Rome and Boston in the United States), whose closeness has sustained me especially in those long days and late nights catching up on emails or documents, long days driving for the Bishop or when the (e)mail was particularly invective.

In a particular way, allow me to offer my sincere thanks to Bishops O'Donoghue, Campbell and Swarbrick for all they have given to me and the confidence they have shown in to serve them, to Catherine Callaghan (and Liz Hendry before her) and to our beloved CMC Sisters (Srs Rogit and Sharon Rose) in the Bishop's Office.

I am so grateful to dear Sister Malgorzata of the Missionary Sisters of Christ the King (and Sister Helena before her) at Bishop's House for their great kindness and generous help over our years together, to all the staff in the Pastoral Centre and to each person who have offered me kindness and support over the years in and around the Diocese – especially in our schools and parishes during so many Visitations and Confirmations. Today, I give thanks to God for the gift all of you have been to me, and know that I will continue to keep you close to my heart as I ask all of you to keep me in your prayers.



Now all this makes me think of the future and this brings me to the word **trust**. As I prepare for a new chapter of my life – canon law studies in Canada - questions like these: Lord, will I be able to start all over again and respond to the responsibilities that will come my way? Will I be able to “let go” as you desire?

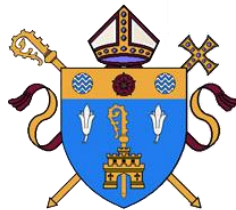
“Let it be done to me according to your Word.” Surely, it is only in saying “yes” to the Lord’s will that we will find that peace and joy for which we long for in life.

It is only human to look to the past and to treasure wonderful memories. Yet, I am reminded, too, about “**today**.” Today, now is the hour for us to stay awake; to stay vigilant; to stay ready and prepared to meet the Lord and what he will be doing for and through us in the new opportunities, new places and new people to serve in His name.

Today (and tomorrow) is God’s gift to us and provides us with the opportunity to echo Mary’s “yes”: “Lord, let it be done to me according to your Word.”

The Rev Robert Billing

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The Catholic Diocese of Lancaster