



THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF
ARUNDEL & BRIGHTON

ST PHILIP HOWARD CENTRE, 6 SOUTHGATE DRIVE, CRAWLEY, RH10 6RP

December 2020

Dear Colleagues,

I hope you are keeping safe and well in these difficult times. I wanted to start this letter by thanking you all – and every single member of your staff – for the incredible work you continue to do to keep school safe and as normal as possible in these extraordinary times. Children in Catholic schools across the Diocese are being educated, protected, nurtured and loved and the positive impact you have on them and their families should not be under-estimated. Particularly heartening was the observation by a Primary Headteacher who, I think, spoke for many when she noted that, despite everything, school continues to be a happy place and “Lockdown has brought us even closer as a community.”

Over the past term, the family of schools has been profoundly affected by Covid-19. Across the Diocese there have been unavoidable closures of classes, year groups and, in some cases, entire key stages; and staff and children alike have fallen prey to the virus. The workload and pressure on staff continue to be enormous, with swift transitions from classroom-based learning to remote learning and back again. Yet life has gone on despite all of this. Schools consistently report exceptionally high levels of attendance and parental support, with children continuing to be excited to be back at school. Having made pastoral phone calls to every Headteacher over the past two weeks, I have repeatedly been touched and impressed by the imaginative lengths schools are going to in order to make Advent and Christmas particularly special for children this year, with live-streamed Nativities, liturgies, pantomimes, Christmas dinner and surprise events going on in schools across the Diocese.

The Oxford English Dictionary gives the definition of “Advent” as 'The arrival of a notable person or thing'. It stems from the Latin 'adventus', meaning 'arrival'. The season of Advent anticipates the "coming of Christ" from three different perspectives: the physical nativity in Bethlehem, the reception of Christ in the heart of the believer, and the Second Coming.

This coming Sunday sees the lighting of the second candle on the Advent wreath. The candles on the wreath symbolize hope, love, joy and peace and are lit in that order. We will hear the opening verses of Mark's Gospel – generally agreed to be the first Gospel to be written. Mark opens his Gospel with a reference to the prophet Isaiah and to John the Baptist, whose ministry was marked by strong convictions, clear communication, genuine humility and, most of all, God's power. John is considered to be the greatest of the prophets, yet he lived as a humble and faithful servant of God. Jesus regarded John the Baptist as the greatest of all men (Matthew 11:11), yet John declared himself unworthy even to untie Jesus' sandals (John 1:27). He was neither weak nor quiet when he saw what needed to be said or done. He wasn't afraid to confront kings, tax collectors, soldiers, and common citizens when needed. And, true to his humility, he pointed others not to himself but to Jesus.

About 750 years earlier, Isaiah had prophesied John the Baptist's ministry and spoken about filling in valleys, smoothing out mountains and hills, transforming cliffs into plains, and ridges into valleys. In other words, removing all the obstacles that get in the way of our meeting with Jesus.

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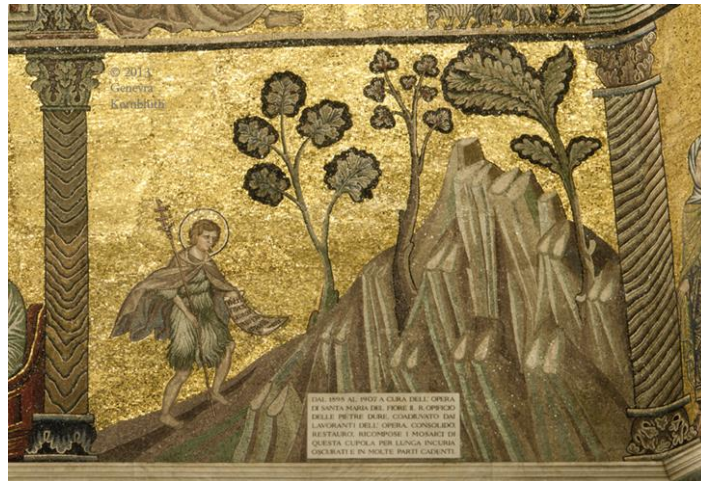
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Both the First Reading and the Gospel have much to say to each of us as Catholic leaders. The world in which we live may at times feel like something of a desert but, like John the Baptist, we need to remove obstacles and show the way so that all within our school communities can come to know Jesus. Like John, we are called upon to be brave and stand out, not blend in, whilst doing so with humility. Then “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.”



John in the wilderness; Baptistery of St. John (Battistero di San Giovanni), Florence

I am delighted to say that Bernadette continues to make good progress. She is much better and beginning to thrive! Thanks to all those who passed on messages of love, support and prayers for Bernadette when I phoned recently. Please be assured I have passed all of these on to Bernadette.

Our CPD offer for next term is now in schools. As ever, please contact Claire Martin to book places or to ask any questions. Last week's termly Diocesan Education Committee considered the fact that outstanding schools will no longer be exempt from routine Ofsted inspections but, from January 2021, will be inspected in the same way as other schools. The Committee discussed the challenges this presents and determined that CPD should be offered to GB representatives from all outstanding diocesan schools and academies. I will be writing to schools shortly with more information on this.

Lastly, I wanted to end where I started, by thanking each of you for everything you are doing. I know how utterly exhausted you are, and how desperately you need a break over Christmas. I hope and pray that you have a peaceful Advent, a smooth lead up to the end of term and the opportunity to rest and recuperate when Christmas comes round. My thoughts and prayers are with you all.

Warmest wishes, as ever,

Marie

Marie Ryan

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