

**PASTORAL LETTER OF BISHOP KIERAN CONRY**  
to be read at all Masses on the weekend of 26/27 July 2014

**17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

For reasons to do with recording and mailing deadlines, I am writing this on the day of the World Cup Final. You will be hearing it when I am in Lourdes with our diocesan pilgrimage. The two events have some similarities, but the connecting thread is fragile. The pundits will claim that an event like the World Cup unites the country behind our national team, when this is simply not true; most people in the country don't care about football, and it appears that the team itself didn't show a great deal of interest and came back home after a few days to go on holiday to Dubai. The team is not 'England'; it is the English football team.

Likewise, when we are in Lourdes, I occasionally remind people that this is not 'Arundel and Brighton' or 'A&B' (other dioceses in Lourdes refer to us as the 'affluent and beautiful') but that we are people from the diocese on pilgrimage. Because not everybody wants to go to Lourdes, and many that do want to go to Lourdes simply can't afford either the money or the time.

But while football might not unite the nation, there is something that unites the diocese. You might expect me to say at this point that it's the bishop, but that would be arrogant (that's the other word that dioceses in Lourdes use when they don't say 'affluent'). The diocese was united still when there wasn't a bishop between March 2000 and June 2001.

What unites us is our faith in Jesus Christ. We all experience that in different ways and to different degrees, but in the end that is what we have in common, and that is what I can assume when I meet parishioners in parishes, when I meet children in our Catholic schools, and when I had the privilege of confirming many of our young people over the past few months. It means that we don't have to start searching for points of reference to establish some sort of relationship. I say to our new Redshirt pilgrims before we go to Lourdes that everyone wearing a red shirt is someone you can trust and make a friend of, and that when they're in Lourdes, anyone wearing an Arundel and Brighton badge is someone who would love to meet and talk to you.

The gospel reading today is that rather odd collection of little images of the Kingdom of Heaven; the first even suggests some sort of deceit - the man finds treasure in a field, hides it again and buys the field at a bargain price. The parables are as much about discernment as anything: the merchant realises that he has a very precious pearl and the fisherman sorts out the good fish from the ones that won't sell. They all realise that they have something very dear to them and something that brings happiness and hope.

Faith is a very precious gift, and we're invited to appreciate just how precious it is. Personally, I have to say that I can't imagine not believing in God. I wonder what people believe in if there is no God-space, or how they look to their future without anything to believe in.

This morning I celebrated mass in a parish with a parish community gathered round their parish priest who recently celebrated his Golden Jubilee of priesthood. It was an enormously happy and blessed occasion, one where the parish came together as a community of faith, of joy and love - that is not an exaggeration, where love is often used so casually and thoughtlessly as a word.

Next year in July we will celebrate our Golden Jubilee as a diocese, and I hope that you will come along to the Amex Stadium in Brighton on July 5 to join the rest of the diocese in our celebration of fifty years. But it's not about the diocese only; the diocese is a means to an end. The diocese exists as a collection of parishes and the parishes exist as communities of believers and disciples of Christ to celebrate their relationship with Christ and encourage others to enter that relationship.

People are naturally proud to show off and share the things they have acquired most recently, and that is especially true if that is a child. I will be happy this evening for whoever wins the World Cup. In the parish this morning, on the notice board, there was a photograph of the two popes praying together. There was a thought bubble above each of them and the thought bubble simply had their national flags in it. I can imagine that Pope Francis might be watching the fortunes of Argentina tonight; I can't believe that Emeritus Pope Benedict will be staying up. These are things that will be forgotten soon. We have something more precious and lasting. Let us show off our faith in Jesus.

I hope that you have a relaxing and peaceful summer break, whatever that means for you. I hope that your parish priest gets a break, too. This might mean that at some time, even this year, there might not be a Sunday Mass - this is the reality in most of the Catholic world. I was in Peru recently in the diocese in which a number of our priests have worked, and Sunday Mass in many parishes is not a weekly event. Our faith is not based exclusively on Sunday Mass; it based on what the Mass expresses, that Jesus died to wipe away our sins and invites us to receive the call to holiness that his sacrifice extends to us. It is a pearl of great price.

With my good wishes and prayers for you when I am in Lourdes.

+ Kieran