

Pastoral Letter to the people of Chatswood Parish

Pentecost 2023

My dear friends,

There is a perspective in theology that regards the event of Pentecost as the birth of the Church.

On this day, the Spirit is poured out on the disciples.

They are released from their disillusionments and their fears; they are enSpirited and emboldened to go out and to preach the good news that the life of Christ is more powerful than death, that the self-sacrifice of his love has overpowered the forces of selfishness and suspicion, that the future stretches out beyond us a constant invitation full of possibility. Our dead-ends have become new beginnings; our sunsets have been changed into dawns.

Yes, on this day the Spirit overwhelms our timidity, our doubt, our anxiety and sends us forth to become a living sign of the power of God manifest in lives of faith, hope, and love.

This is a remarkable acclamation. It is made even more so given that many around us are proclaiming not the birth of the Church but its death. Many are the occasions where we have to endure the public commentary about the decline of the Church.

The question is constantly put forward, particularly by the media, about the future of the Church. How can the Church ever recover from the challenges that threaten to engulf it, people ask.

But the Church is not dead. It lives, and what is more, it will keep on living. It will keep on being birthed in new ways, in new places and at new times. This is our bold and proud affirmation on this day of Pentecost.

Yes, its form may not necessarily stay the same. It may look quite different in ten, twenty, fifty years' time. However, I have no doubt at all that it will remain present.

It will be present, alive, and active, because we are not dealing here with a mere human institution that is dependent on the idiosyncrasies and failure of its members.



We are dealing here with a community of people enlivened by the very Spirit of God, brought into being by their shared experience of the life of Jesus Christ which keeps irrupting in the hearts of people and calling them into lives of discipleship.

Whenever I may have my own fears about the future of the Church, I look around me here in our parish.

Here I see extraordinary sanctity. Here I see people who in undramatic ways give of themselves with such love and generosity. Here I see people who in the quietness of their hearts keep entrusting themselves into the power of God's life.

Here, everyday, I see people whose faith, hope, and love cast light across the shadows that creep across the horizons of their lives.

And in that light, I say to myself, "Here is the Church, and it is not dying. It breathes and lives with such strength and vigour." And yes, the message of Jesus Christ will keep calling forth people to see their lives and their struggles through the meaning and the hope that it offers.

No, the Church is not dying. It is living and constantly coming to birth. This is because before it is a noun, the Church is a verb. It is people coming together, using the words of the theologian Chauvet, "re-reading the Scriptures with the memory of Jesus, repeating his gestures in memory of him, and living the fellowship with one another in his name."

We cannot believe in the Resurrection of Jesus, without believing in the Church. The life of the Risen Christ is made present precisely in the community of those who find their future in his memory, the community which is the Body of the living Christ. And this Body will keep sparking because of the divine life that it bears, albeit in such earthen vessels.

We open our hearts to the Spirit of God poured out on us. It is the Spirit that renews and re-creates. It is the Spirit that keeps giving birth to the Church.

In that Spirit we celebrate what God is doing in us, and what God will always do in us, through us, and for us. In the Spirit, it is never the time for despair. It is always the time to celebrate possibility.

I spoke of such an opportunity first at Pentecost 2021, shortly after I had come to Chatswood.

From my earliest days in the community, I could perceive the enormous potential that resided in our community, our church, and our church and educational precinct.

At that time, I invited us to dream about all manner of creative and constructive possibilities. And for this, I encouraged us to go on a journey together over the time ahead.

And so, in March 2022 we set out on a journey together, guided by the Holy Spirit, to discover what it means to truly be Church in the City.

Since then, with the tremendous leadership and creativity of our Parish Pastoral & Missionary Council, we have shared our hopes and dreams for our church, our parish community and our precinct.

We have undertaken a number of parishioner surveys to assist us develop a clear understanding of where we are today.

And most importantly, out of all the many and diverse ministries and associations in our parish, we have developed ten **Ministry Circles**, each offering opportunities for people of every age...



Towards the end of 2022 and over the last weeks since Easter we began focussing intently on discerning our Parish Mission, a short statement that defines our reason for being and what we sense the call of God to be in this time and in this place.

Amazingly, we had 1,447 parishioner responses through a variety of shared discernment activities. To inform our Mission, we firstly discerned together our five most important purposes as a parish:

Love, kindness and compassion towards others: The importance of loving God, loving one another, being a good example and serving others with kindness and humility.

Evangelisation, spreading God's Word and love: Parishioners discerned that we should focus on spreading the word of God and evangelising to those who may have lapsed or who are not yet familiar with the teachings of Jesus - making disciples by helping others in their individual faith journey.

Growing together in Faith: The need for us all to grow together in faith, deepen our relationship with God and find greater meaning and purpose in our lives.

Helping those in need and serving others: The importance of serving others in the community and helping those in need - acts of compassion and action - a strong charitable presence in our community.

Community building and supporting each other: The need for us all to come together as a parish community to support and nurture one another spiritually, act as a source of good in the community, and help those in need.

Drawing upon these purposes which God is calling us to focus on, we discerned a number of potential mission statements, narrowed down and shortlisted the potential statements, and then coming together as a parish community on the weekend of 13/14 May, discerned our adopted Parish Mission.

And so, on this great Festival of Pentecost, I am pleased to share with you the Parish Mission we have discerned together to be:

“Bringing the light of Christ to the city. We love, we grow, we serve.”

This is given to us through the Spirit as not only a celebration but also as a responsibility. The question arises how might we take this forward so that it can permeate every aspect of our life together as a Christian community?

To this end, through much reflection and discussion, I wish to propose a new framework for us being Church in the City – a structure of ongoing pastoral discernment in line with the call of Pope Francis to the universal Church.

This means walking together, guided by the Holy Spirit, faithful to our encounter with the Risen Lord, and faithful to the Catholic Tradition through which God has continued to reveal himself through the authority of the Magisterium.

Such a way of being Church is one that emerges from our source, the Triune God, which St John Paul II defined so creatively as “a community in missionary tension” and which he taught must inform the identity of every Christian entity and vocation.

It is a synodal Church that listens, queries, discerns, and acts, assisted by the service of authority which ensures our communion with the entire Church, current and past.

At the service of assuming responsibility for the Parish Mission we have now discerned, how might we become such a parish? For it is my conviction that a parish characterised this way will ensure we remain accountable to our Mission such that it becomes enSpired and living.

To this end, I propose a new opportunity for us to transition from having a Parish Pastoral & Missionary Council, in which few participate, to being a **Parish-in-Council** which might draw many more together in ongoing pastoral discernment.

This initiative will build on what we have achieved to date in the formation of Circles of Ministry.

Not only will it bring the leadership of the Circles together, but also our parish staff and canonically mandated committees such as our Parish Finance Committee, and, indeed, all those who wish to participate in the pastoral considerations before us.

Thus, our Parish will come together in Council three to four times a year, commencing in August 2023.

Each session will be for an extended period of a day. The day will be of prayer, reflection, discussion, discernment, and fellowship. It will be open to all those who contribute to the life of our parish community through their many generousities.

These times together ‘in Council’ will be served by our Animating our Future Circle which, with my leadership as Parish Priest, will act as its executive.



Bringing the light of
Christ to the city.

We love, we grow,
we serve.



Our Lady
OF DOLOURS



At each session we will deepen the implications of our Parish Mission and together take our journey of Being Church in the City forward, considering now where we need to develop and how.

This, then, will have a critical role in developing our parish vision, priorities and areas for focus for our parish over the coming three years.

My friends, this is an innovative and bold step. This is not envisaging a one off or occasional 'parish assembly', but a new way of being a Catholic Parish, a way of Being Church in the City, now animated by our Mission.

It is, I believe, a sign of the life of the Spirit whom we celebrate at Pentecost, a sign of the Spirit continuing to give birth to the Church, the living body of the Resurrected Christ.

May this Spirit renew us in ways beyond what we imagined. "See I am doing something new in your midst, can you not see it." (Isaiah 43:9)

Come Holy Spirit
Enkindle the hearts of the Faithful
Renew the face of the earth!

With you on this very exciting, grace-filled journey,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David R". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Fr. David Ranson PP VG
Our Lady of Dolours Chatswood Catholic Parish

