



DIOCESE OF SALFORD

Pastoral Letter of the Right Reverend John Arnold Bishop of Salford

*To be read in all Churches on the weekend of 13/14th June, 2015,
the Eleventh Sunday of Ordinary time.*

My dear Brothers and Sisters,

I have now been with you in the Diocese of Salford for six months and I am very grateful for the welcome I have continued to receive and the encouragement from so many people. Getting to know the Diocese, its people, priests and religious inevitably takes time but you have made me feel at home among you.

Pope Francis continues to challenge us in so many ways, asking that we respond to the changing times in which we live, creating a renewed missionary spirit in our parishes and calling everyone, without exception, to be “missionary disciples” in the circumstances of our daily lives. We must rise to that challenge and ask how best we may equip ourselves for our mission.

The document “Preparing the Way” has already brought a good deal of thoughtful and helpful response from many individuals. Later this month there will be an opportunity for everyone to respond to a short questionnaire which will help me to make decisions for the next stage of our journey with the Lord. The questionnaire will include some questions concerning the age at which our young people are to receive the Sacraments of Reconciliation, First Communion and Confirmation - all of which are presently received by children aged seven years. A number of people, particularly priests and catechists, have expressed the opinion that the children would benefit from being confirmed later. The consultation will assist in gathering opinions about any change of that age. The matter is made a little more complicated by the fact that the Bishops of England and Wales are currently deciding on age limits within which children may be confirmed and our current practice will no longer be available to us. Each diocese will then need to decide when, within those limits, our young people are to be offered Confirmation. There are questions, too, as to whether Reconciliation and Holy Communion should be celebrated at a later age.

For practical purposes, since parishes and schools will soon be planning dates, I think it best to decide now that we do not prepare our seven year olds for Confirmation next year. We

can wait until the consultation is completed and the decision made by the Bishops' Conference before determining the age for our children to be confirmed in the future. Preparation for First Reconciliation and First Communion will continue as before, at least for the coming year and while the consultation continues. Catechetical materials will be modified to best prepare the children for these two Sacraments.

Pope Francis has also called for a Holy Year, dedicated to the celebration of Mercy. At the Holy Father's suggestion, each cathedral will have a Holy Door and other churches and places of particular importance, will be nominated as places of pilgrimage. We will give particular attention to the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a Sacrament of renewal and hope and the expression of God's merciful love and we will investigate particular ways in which we may express something of the mercy of God through our social outreach and care for the poorest and those most in need.

Finally, in these days, Pope Francis is publishing an encyclical on the environment and the stewarding of creation. I have never known a papal encyclical to have attracted so much interest both within the Church and well beyond the Church's boundaries, prior to publication. It is eagerly awaited by scientists, politicians and development agencies. We must study its reasoning and recommendations and see how best we may respond through parishes and schools and our homes. This document will have long term implications for us all.

So there is plenty to do and there seems to me all the more reason to continue with our prayer "Stay with us, Lord, on our journey". I shall hope to make a full report available to you after the summer about the outcome of the consultation, with decisions for the future. There can be no standing still. Each one of us must be looking to deepen our faith. We must be giving particular attention to how we encourage our children in their faith, both by our teaching and our example and we must seek, in practical ways, to respond to the call of Pope Francis to celebrate a Holy Year of Mercy and protect and preserve God's gift to us of our world.

May God bless you for all that you do and may the grace and strength of the Holy Spirit guide us in all that we will do in God's name.

Yours devotedly

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "John".

✠ John Arnold
Bishop of Salford