



The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter - April 2009

A Spiritual Credit Crunch

A WISE PRIEST said to me recently that, when times are hardest in the Church, we need more prayer, more holiness, and not less. The tendency is to cut back, keep to our routines, and take less on. It's rather like most people's response to the economic problems we have been living through: cut back, maintain necessary expenditure, don't buy anything new. But, as any economist will tell you, that spells disaster: if I postpone buying that new car for a year, who is going to pay the car workers? If the car workers aren't working, they too can't spend. If they can't spend, someone else goes out of work, and so on. We all need to maintain as near normal a level of buying and selling, making and spending, as we can, the economists say. That way, recession doesn't become depression and depression slump.

I wonder if we could apply that recipe to the Church.... Certainly, the Catholic movement in the Church of England is going through a very difficult time. Some can't see any future. For others, nothing makes sense. Others – priests approaching retirement and lay people in the autumn of their lives – say 'it'll see me out', as if the Church were an amenity or club. We need instead to maintain at least a normal level of activity, and, if possible, increase our output. One of the glories of the Catholic movement this last fifteen years, when everything has supposedly gone 'pear-shaped,' is that we have never together celebrated and understood the mysteries so well, we have never been so effective in our evangelism and our catechesis. The bookings for baptism and confirmation continue to come in. Those enquiring about ordination continue to be an interesting lot.

How do we increase our output? Perhaps the immediate answer is to try to achieve or maintain some of the things that we hoped to do or managed to do during Lent. Bible reading. Prayer. The odd midweek Mass. That group. That book. That DVD. Maybe this is just the time to tackle some parish evangelism, to try some new work for the Kingdom. 'How naïve!' you might say. Not so. None of us knows what God is doing with us, in us and through us. He is not like some banker whose assets have turned toxic. Spiritually, we're all on a sub-prime mortgage: none of us can pay our way to heaven. But the capital behind us is endless and infinite. The promise is sure. The currency guaranteed. Let's spend our way out of this spiritual credit crunch: what matters is not so much whether we are still Church of England or have become Roman Catholic when we go to meet our maker; what matters rather is whether we shall be able to hear his voice. 'Well done, good and faithful servant...enter into the joy of your master' (Matthew 25:21).

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