



## The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter – February 2009

### Forward in Love?

**W**HAT ARE you doing on St Valentine's Day? Quite a few of us will be gathered in London for an extraordinary assembly of Forward in Faith. On 28th January 2006 we had a gathering called 'Forward in Hope'. I wonder if, three years later, and appropriately on St Valentine's Day, we shall manage to go 'Forward in Love', thus completing the cycle of theological virtues in 1 Corinthians 13.

'Forward in Love', if that is what the assembly is finally called, will be one of the toughest tests of Forward in Faith to date. For one thing, it will be responding to a meeting of the General Synod which will have ended only a day or two earlier. Like the Leader of the Opposition on Budget Day, the Forward in Faith assembly will have almost no time to hear what is proposed before it is time to respond. For another thing, the signs are not good that the Synod has heard – let alone understood - the theological position of traditionalists. The 'Code of Practice' argument sounds uncomfortably close to letting us go on in our own sweet way, like children playing in the garden, whilst the proper Church gets on with its grown-up business.

So, the question is: is Love possible amidst the wreckage? Is it possible to go 'Forward in Love' when our needs are not understood, when our point of view is patronised and vilified, when the very foundations of the Catholic Faith, as we Anglicans understand it, are put at risk? The theological answer has to be 'yes'. We follow a Lord whose Love was shown most clearly amidst the wreckage. We follow a Lord who was patronised ('Hail King of the Jews!') and vilified ('He has blasphemed...He deserves to die'). In a Christian understanding, Love is never more authentic than when it is expressed and experienced amidst disaster and danger.

For over eight years I have tried to lead the Ebbsfleet community as a local Church in formation. Some onlookers have been unnerved by this and would have preferred me to be pre-occupied by church politics and by helping to run a single-issue pressure group. I believe we need to keep our eye on being the Church – evangelising, catechising, worshipping, and living the Faith. This has always been my set of priorities and they remain just as important now. There may be some partings of the ways ahead – none of that is as yet clear – but however, and wherever, we travel, we must do our best to go 'Forward in Love' (whether or not the St Valentine's assembly is called that).

May God bless you as you follow his Way, the Way of Christ.

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