

REPORT ON DEANERY CONFERENCE 2011

27-30 May at All Saints Pastoral Centre

The point of the Conference is to gather our scattered parishes together around our Archbishop, to worship and to come to know one another. The theme of the conference *Love of God, Our Neighbour and Ourselves* could not have been more appropriate. We certainly worshipped in style, thanks to the hard working choir under Annemarie de Visser. At the Episcopal Liturgy on Sunday Archbishop Gabriel had thirteen concelebrants, a proto-deacon and three other deacons. We also came to know people better, over meals, drinks, in discussion groups, so that as Fr John Marks said at the end, it was an united conference..

Archbishop Gabriel cheered us by telling us that he had been given the all clear and that he has given up smoking. Certainly he is looking very well. He thanked us for our prayers, of which he had been very aware while in hospital. Prayer for others is a sign of love. When we write a name on our prosphora lists we are saying 'I love you, therefore I pray for you.' If we cannot love someone we must still pray for them. When strangers come to our churches and see that we love one another, we have been missionaries. We always respect others because God loves them.

The Archbishop asked that when he comes to visit our services should be as normal (do not learn special music) and it does not matter how many are there. The important thing is that we are together, being the Church.

Fr David Gill spoke on God's Love for Us: Incarnate Love of Christ.

The Old Testament shows the dawning of a personal relationship with God. Christ brings a new relationship, not just respect and fear but love. The heart of the Gospel is the restoration of a relationship of love. God's love is shown on the cross, which is not a sacrifice to satisfy an angry God but a setting free. Pentecost is an outpouring of God's love. It is not about power, tongues or miracles but about love. The saints have experienced God's love and are amazed by it. They know that Christ carries us back to the Father with him. God is already within us, working to transform us.

Dr Mary Cunningham spoke on Intimate Love in Friendship and Marriage

Marriage as a sacramental mystery involves both the physical and the spiritual. Although at times less celebrated than celibacy we find an increase in the number of married saints e.g. St Thomais of Lesbos, a battered wife. Sts Joachim and Anna are cited as exemplars of quiet holiness, a creative presence in the Church. Unlike western theology there has never been a negative view of erotic love in Orthodox tradition. All the forms of love in the New Testament are given by God. Eros in sexual union and love toward God are both God-implanted drives.

There was a lively discussion. Was Eden asexual? There are no forms to follow in friendship; we always need to discover how much the other wants to give and how close (s)he wants me to be. Rites of Brotherhood are found in old Euchologia. Widows and widowers have spent 'the big coin of love and have only the small coins to give'. Does a non-marital relationship exclude from Communion. The 'Book of Questions and Answers' (a pastoral manual) seems to suggest that Communion is more important than marital status.

Fr Michael Evdokimov's talk The Response of the Saints to God's Love was read by **Jeanne Knights** as Fr Michael was tending his sick wife. Miss Knights is Director of the charity Saints Alive (www.saintsalive.org.uk).

St Francis of Assisi and St Seraphim of Sarov both lived in periods of social and cultural change, when the Church was affected by sectarianism. St Francis displayed the uncreated light and St Seraphim was transfigured. Both saints created peaceful atmospheres, both were fascinated by the humility of Christ. Both entered into Christ's suffering, St Francis by his stigmata, St Seraphim with his rock. Both had special sympathy with women, as seen in Clare and the nuns of Diveyevo. By their purity both had lost the smell of death which humans carry caused by the Fall, so the animals were not afraid. We have the wolf and the bear within us and must tame them by love.

Discussion showed a variety of views on the stigmata. But we must not condemn the unique relationship of God with each individual in its unique manifestation. St Francis was compared to Fools for Christ.

A new item in the Conference programme was a session on **Our Life as a Deanery**.

Archbishop Gabriel regretted that he does not receive information from the parishes. He asked us to send him reports of our parish meetings and to send material to the Feuillet. He again encouraged twinning. *[There are two other parishes dedicated in honour of the Holy Transfiguration, in Stavanger and Stockholm. Direct flights are currently being offered for £86 and £58 respectively.]*

We heard a report from the Community of St Celer at Plas Geler in Carmarthenshire. They have only four communicants but several enquirers and are served by a monk from Canada.

The parish of St Nicholas in Dunblane is larger and was well represented at the Conference. It covers a very wide area of Scotland, including Shetland. Their church is a converted cottage and their first service was on the evening of the Dunblane massacre. We are asked to pray for Fr. Alexander, their priest, and his wife Julie who are in poor health.

Mary Ann De Trana spoke on Love of God: Godly Self Care

We do not leave space/time for our souls to catch up with our bodies. We have lost our Sabbath. Know yourself, forgive yourself, forget yourself. Self care is like an oxygen mask; if you do not wear it you cannot help others. Sit and stand properly, breathe properly, set aside days for yourself, find an intimate friend. Use the Acathist of Thanksgiving for All Things

Round Table: The Community as an Organism of Love.

Costa Carras gave a closely argued paper which began with John of Damascus on the importance of matter, and moved through the development of church buildings, the nature of the Church, ecology, the challenge of witness and the need to draw on tradition and renew it.

Amal Dibo spoke passionately from her situation in Lebanon, from where many Christians are emigrating. She spoke of the importance of the laity and of the parish as the place where bonds of love are established. She regretted the spread of rigidity within Orthodoxy at a time when people are searching for spirituality. The cross is the wedding of the Bridegroom with the Church.

Fr John Musther from Keswick reminded us that the humanity of Christ is the basis of our sanctification. The Church should move by consensus, not domination. Mercy, forbearance, patience, and humility are the essentials.

In discussion it was suggested that that the hospital in MASH should be our model, healing on the move, responding adaptively to need. It was pointed out that we had not mentioned joy. There should be joy in our love. In the Psalms 'rejoice' is a command.

Ian Randall