



THE ARCHDIOCESE of BIRMINGHAM

PARISH VISITATION DEANERY OF Banbury and Warwick

Parish of St Gregory Stratford-upon-Avon [parish no 185]

Visitor: The Right Reverend Paul Gunter, Abbot of Douai
Parish Priest Fr. Alexander Austin OSB

Date of Visitation: 25/26 November 2023
Report updated June 2024

Summary of Visitation Activities:

Conversation with Fr Alexander Austin OSB [pp] Yes
Conversation with ... Headteacher (Not possible)
Visit the Sick and Housebound of the Parish - Yes
Visit care homes - Yes
Celebrate the Parish Masses: Saturday 5.30pm Sunday 11.15am - Yes
Present at the Sunday Mass at Shottery - preached
Parish Meeting – broadly attended by the different ministers of the parish.

*Paul Gunter OSB
Abbot of Douai*

A brief profile of the Parish.

An Incorporated parish of Douai Abbey, founded in 1852, St Gregory's Stratford-upon Avon has two churches: St Gregory the Great, and Our Lady of Peace and Blessed Robert Dibdale at Shottery, opened in 1973.

St Gregory's is on the edge of the town centre, was built in 1866 and is a much-loved local landmark. Stratford-upon-Avon as a town is infra-structurally challenged because it has grown in size remarkably quickly. It is broadly prosperous but not univocally so. The people of the town welcome many visitors as an essential part of the local economy, though often at the expense of the needs of Stratford for Stratford's sake. A number of people I met during the weekend of the visitation presented this viewpoint.

Many of the Catholic children are not in the Catholic school of St Gregory the Great, which is a good school, preferring the village schools in the district, and private education where it is a viable option for them. The Section 48 Ofsted demonstrated commitment on the part of St

Gregory's RC Primary school to Catholic life* On account of the local demography, the population of Stratford and its villages tend to be older, while the estates in and around the town offer a broader age-range, and with social variety.

The administration of the parish is more effective at the present time, stabilising after a period when administrative staff in the parish office were drawing towards the end of their time. The parish priest has been in post since 2010, and the restoration of St Gregory's is a valuable tribute to his extensive tenure.

* This commitment is led by the Principal, Laura Cole who is building up the school's links with the parish

The Parish Meeting

The aim of the parish meeting was to discuss the implementation of the Diocesan Vision: *'Our vision is to be a Catholic Diocese which is faithful to the mission entrusted to us by Jesus Christ, full of missionary disciples who work together co-responsibly in vibrant communities of faith, joyful in their service of God and neighbour'*.

The parishioners organised a strong presentation of a parish where shared collaboration is valued, and whose life is in good heart. There was demonstrated robust lay-involvement in decision making within the parish structure, as well as in their generous assistance of the parish priest, who cannot be expected to go on for ever. It was acknowledged that priests are too few nowadays for what is needed, but that a Synodal way of thinking and acting was attitudinal above all, and that it would promote initiatives to be taken no less apposite to local needs.

Safeguarding is at the heart of everything, and its measures are effective.

Provisions for sacramental programmes are looked after by a catechist who is not only a qualified Catholic teacher, but also experienced theologically.

Of particular commendation at St Gregory's was the work undertaken to support the bereaved. There can be expected a particular growth commensurate with this area of need.

It was also appreciated that ecumenical relations locally are good.

Parish Institutions

There are many care homes, and sheltered-housing. Visiting the sick was at the heart of the visitation, and it was a pleasure to meet the sick and housebound, to pray with them, and encourage them alongside the parish priest. They spoke warmly, and with appreciation for the visits they receive, especially from the extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist.

Stratford-upon-Avon has a hospital which provides much-needed care to the local community and beyond. Parishioners also participate in a prison visiting scheme at HMP Long Lartin. Care of the poor in a variety of ways is prioritised in the parish.

There are selective-entry schools in Stratford, both a grammar school for boys, and a grammar school for girls, quite apart from a successful comprehensive school in the town. These present ongoing challenges for the Catholic schools in the area, both primary and secondary.

Parish Masses and Liturgy

Both Masses at Stratford that weekend were well-attended. The 5.30pm Mass was a Mass of introduction and preparation for the 2024 confirmandi, around whom the Liturgy was arranged. The confirmandi with their parents swelled the numbers, but who also gave evidence of a Confirmation programme that functions well. Otherwise, the Liturgy was what would be required for a Saturday Vigil Mass.

It was a pleasure to witness how strong the Polish Mass is in itself, and the size of its community.

Individualism is a trait that appeared evident, especially at St Gregory's. However, it was no less understandable, upon meeting people after each of the Masses, that many come to church for different reasons. Some have various family commitments, for example, that make human contribution to church programmes a challenge. Others were eager to meet and greet, curiously enough, especially after the 5.30pm Mass, in the dark, on the piazza!

The Mass at Shottery is customarily oriented toward families and this functioned well with a guitarist whose personal skills of communication encouraged participation to draw in the congregation within the experience. The church was comfortably full, organised well, and there were a number of families. It is obvious that the children's liturgy is appreciated there. Particularly noteworthy was the community dimension after Mass, when many gathered for coffee and in a context of welcome.

Affirmation of Parish Life

This was profiled at each of the Masses. It had been the express wish of the Archbishop of Birmingham throughout the archdiocese that any visitation acknowledged and affirmed the Catholic Life that was present. Two paragraphs from my homily at Stratford are consistent with the kind of conversation we had on the Saturday evening. Parish life was affirmed and encouraged, not least for its urgency in the works of evangelisation and social outreach:

Nowadays, if fragmentation is not to overwhelm us, and the Church convey the unique hope of Christ today, the challenges of mission in Stratford are obvious. At the last census in 2021, 35.9% of the people around here reported having 'no religion', while 56.4% of people (down from 70%) identify themselves as Christian. There will be many reasons for this, as sociologists will tell us, but we cannot lose sight of how we got here, examine uncomfortable data with humility, but with enterprise, and prepare eagerly and energetically for what is ahead. The Second Vatican Council responded to social change brought about in the aftermath of World War 2, while the Synod, courageously called by Pope Francis, is navigating the approach with which what has to be addressed in our time is faced, so that we can look forward, proclaiming truth with love, but not 'caught on the back foot'.

This feast of Christ the King incentivises and consoles us. The sevenfold kingdom of Christ listed in the preface of this Mass, identifies the contours of the culture believers are expected to build in their midst: *'Truth, life, holiness, grace, justice, love and peace.'* God does not change or have an end. He is without beginning or end. That is our consolation. No matter what, God is with us, accompanying us, strengthening us. As Ezekiel prophesied: **"I am going to look after my flock myself and keep all of it in view."**

Finally,

I should like to express my thanks to ...

All who facilitated the various aspects of the visitation in both churches and in the parish meeting rooms at Stratford and Shottery. The hard work and preparation is noted and appreciated. It was a pleasure to meet so many people, those I had known for years, but similarly people who have come to the parish more recently. Warm gratitude is owed to the parish priest who, despite particular struggles on account of his knee operation, due to take place in December/January 2024, proved customarily hospitable, generous, and attentive.