

Today marks the beginning of a new parish set-up in the Central Borders, where the three parishes of St Cuthbert's, Melrose, Our Lady & St Joseph's, Selkirk and Our Lady & St Andrew's, Galashiels, become one parish, the parish of Our Lady & St Andrew.

This merging of the three parishes, if we are honest, is because of a decline - a decline in numbers of practicing Catholics, a decline in the number of baptisms, a decline in the number of marriages, a decline in the numbers of priests. At this stage, we have two options; we accept the continued decline as inevitable and we continue to come to Mass, put our money in the plate and say our prayers. Taking this option, I am convinced, would mean that this merger would be the first of many mergers which would eventually lead to the closure of churches and a weakening of the Catholic Faith in this part of the country.

The other option is that we look at ourselves as this new community which has an opportunity to grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ, the King of the Universe, so that we can grow this new community into something which attracts others to follow Jesus Christ and which does not accept that continued decline is inevitable.

I would prefer that we adopt the second option.

The second option requires, of course, so much more of us. I am willing to work for it, as I am sure many of you are, too. If we adopt the second option, I would envisage this parish as having the following priorities, not necessarily in this order:

1. Adult formation – that we, as adults, open ourselves up to being challenged in our relationship with Jesus Christ. To do this we need to get to know who he is, and to this end, I would like to offer courses throughout the year to help us get to know him better.
2. Spiritual formation – that we are called to a relationship with Jesus Christ, which means that we must be people who pray, people who speak to and listen to God. I would envisage this parish as being a noticeably praying community.
3. Children's/youth formation – we must introduce our young people to Jesus in a way which will attract them to maintain that relationship throughout their lives so that they can actively discern their vocation. Youth groups tailored to age groups would be a priority for me in this community.
4. Mission – we must be a missionary parish. We will not grow if we do not take the Gospel beyond these walls. I would like this parish to be a community which actively discerns how we might engage those in our area and bring them to know Jesus Christ. I would also like this parish to be a community which recognises its place in the universal Church and to discern how we might contribute to the more 'traditional' missionary territories, sharing with those less fortunate than ourselves.
5. A force for the good – this parish should be actively engaged in the local community, responding to its needs and being a shining example of Christian love.

6. Social – that we gather together socially to get to know each other and enjoy each other's company. Without a social aspect, we are merely people who come to the same church rather than a community.
7. Sustainable – we need to consider how we maintain this community financially in line with the considerable cost of maintaining a number of properties, some of which are very old.

This is the vision that I have for this new parish; a parish whose people know Jesus Christ through prayer and study; whose children are given the tools to do the same; whose people look beyond the community in which they find themselves; a community which is a force for good in this area; a community which spends time with each other socially; a community which is financially responsible.

This vision is not exhaustive, it is not set in stone, it is something which can be tweaked, added to and taken from as circumstances dictate. But I think, overall, it is something which we can all agree would be good for this parish as we move forward.

To achieve anything like this, I need your help. We need a strong parish council who will buy into the vision and help make it a reality. We need people to really discern how it is that they might contribute to this vision. We need a finance council that will help us to see what is possible financially. Above all, we need people praying for the success of this endeavour, which will be no small feat.

The timeframe for getting things going is loose. I envision that after Easter, we will be in a position to erect a parish council, whose task will be to help me prioritise, make better and make a reality these ideas. At the same time, I would like to be in a position to erect a finance council.

In the meantime, I would like to ask you to prayerfully consider what God might be asking of you as we enter this new phase in the life of the Church in the Borders. What is God asking me to give to this? Not all of us are able to 'do' things, but all of us are able to pray for the success of this new community. I am looking forward to this challenge, I am up for it, and I hope that you will join me in taking it on.