



## The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

### Homily for Saints Peter and Paul (29<sup>th</sup> June) 2024

Recently on *Youtube* there was an item commenting on the fact that over the next couple of years there will be a generational change in the Vatican. Many of those at or near the top of various important dicasteries will retire - from office or the world - and be replaced by a younger cohort of clerics. These are men - and possibly for the first time a few women - whose experience of the world before they were immured in the ecclesiastical civil service will have been markedly different from that of those whose places they will take. There is also a perception that, in recent years, the criteria by which individuals are selected to be shunted along the curial career conveyor-belt have altered. This all means that in the coming years, a very different perspective and attitude will pervade the corridors of the Vatican palace.

However, it is not just within the ranks of Roman Catholicism that we can see at least the seeds of a sea-change in the clerical and quasi-clerical culture. Many denominations, including our own are experiencing something similar.

Of course, as generations of ordinations have fed into the life of the Church over the centuries there have been inevitable developments - evolutions perhaps - as the particular personalities of those who are ordained, interacting with the community of the Church and the society around us, bring their influence to bear.

At the same time, in recent years, there has been a degree of social engineering in this process: a more tightly prescribed profile of the sorts of people who are selected and a thorough revision of the content of training.

One of the issues of this is that the decisions underlying these changes have been taken in ecclesiastical corners remote from generality of people in the pews, which is creating something of a mismatch between the expectations of those in Holy Orders between the clerics on the one hand and many in the congregations on the others.

Again, there has always been an element of this: it is the role of the parish priest to stand back a little from the congregation and see where development and amendment would be beneficial or, in some cases, essential; and then to try and lead the Christian community in that direction. However, it is all a matter of degree; and the gap between priest and people should not be so great as to undermine the sense of the priest belonging to and being part of the Christian community - either in his mind or that of the congregation.

Yet, in some iterations of the vision coming from the centre - or through the centre from some think-tank garret - the notion of the priest presiding amidst the congregation is ceding to one of the priest as consultant and occasional chaplain to what is effectively a lay-led association.

Ironically, this is leading to the emergence of what we might term *neo-clericalism*: not predicated, as clericalism once was, on the sacral functions of the clergy and their supposed but rarely attained detachment from worldly entanglements, but on such a wide gap between the visions for the nature of local church life between priests and congregations that those in Holy Orders are a people set apart.

Of course, as I have already said, the life and character of the Church has never stood still; but the present developments raise all sorts of questions - not least the theological understanding of ordained priesthood within the life of the Church; and, indeed, the role - if any - of stable Christian communities. Our generational change will, at best, see a very different Church from the one that we have known.