

Deanery of Oxford North

Parish Visitation of Corpus Christi, Headington and Our Lady of Lourdes, Wheatley

Weekend of the 1st – 2nd November 2025
Solemnity of All Saints

Parish Priest: Canon Mervyn Tower
Bishop Richard Walker

In the weeks leading to the Parish Visitation at Corpus Christi, I was grateful to Canon Mervyn for putting together a programme for the visitation to enable a number of meetings with parishioners and with various representative groups, allowing me to gain an insight into the life of the parish and to discuss matters of concern as they arose. At every meeting, appreciation was expressed for the work and ministry of Canon Mervyn

Saturday Afternoon

After my arrival at the presbytery, I met, briefly, with Canon Mervyn, as Parish Priest, setting the scene for the weekend. Canon Mervyn and I continued our conversation throughout the weekend. Canon Mervyn has been Parish Priest in Headington since 2015 and Dean of the Oxford North Deanery since 2019 and so has considerable experience of the Parish and surrounding area.

The Parish of Corpus Christi is a vibrant and thriving parish, with a Saturday evening Mass at Our Lady of Lourdes and three Sunday Masses at Corpus Christi; two in the morning and one in the evening. The Mass at Our Lady of Lourdes was the least well attended, but all three Masses at Corpus Christi had full congregations. Canon Mervyn acknowledged that the long-term future of the church at Wheatley was in question but that, whilst still Parish Priest, he was happy to continue to celebrate the Saturday evening Mass.

Canon Mervyn has now reached retirement age but, for the present, is content to continue as Parish Priest. He was recently re-elected as Dean of the Oxford North Deanery.

Canon Mervyn, whilst discussing the nature of the Deanery, mentioned that although clusters have now been established within the Deanery, there is, perhaps due to the diverse nature of the parishes it contains, limited co-operation and interaction between the parishes. This is something that will need to be developed in the future.

The Parish of Corpus Christi is situated in a residential area near the centre of Headington and close to the centre of Oxford. The population of the parish reflects the diverse, international nature of the area, containing long-term residents as well as many who have settled from a wide variety of nationalities. This diversity is regularly celebrated, particularly during the International Mass and lunch weekend.

The Parish has an active musical life, with music of different types, but of good quality, being provided at each of the four Sunday Masses.

Sacramental Preparation for First Holy Communion, First Reconciliation and Confirmation takes place at St. Joseph's School, for those who attend, and for those who are not in Catholic School, preparation is led by Sr. Marie Ann, of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who lives in the parish.

Preparation for Marriage is led by Canon Mervyn, with the assistance of Oxford Catholic Marriage Care and there are Journey in Faith sessions together with meetings with Canon Mervyn for those wishing to be received into the Church.

The Parish has a Pastoral Council, a Finance Committee and a Safeguarding Representative, and is hoping to appoint an Health and Safety Co-ordinator. There is also a Thursday Lunch Club, a Mosaic Group for discussion and prayer, a Justice and Peace Group and the Parish is a member of the local ecumenical group. Canon Mervyn mentioned that he is aware that more could be done in the parish to encourage and enable activities and support for young people. Perhaps this could be considered by working with the other parishes in the cluster of which Corpus Christi is a part, namely, St. Anthony of Padua and Greyfriars.

Following my arrival and discussion with Canon Mervyn, I had the opportunity to visit some members of the Parish who are housebound

I then celebrated the evening Mass at Our Lady of Lourdes. At each of the Sunday Masses I preached about the Diocesan Vision and how it relates to the life of the Parish. Following the celebration of Mass we held an open meeting in the church, which gave me the opportunity to listen to parishioners voice their thoughts and concerns about the life of the parish. The parishioners were appreciative of the celebration of Mass and grateful for the ministry of Canon Mervyn, but there was, it was clear, concern about the future of the church of Our Lady of Lourdes. I replied that, given the current situation, no guarantees could be given at this stage, but were changes to be envisaged, there would be a process of consultation.

Following the meeting, I attended supper at the Priory, the residence of Sr. Marie Ann, where I met, over the meal, with members of the Parish Pastoral Council and Finance Committee. It was clear that, encouraged by Canon Mervyn, the members of both groups are very involved with and supportive of the life of the parish. The parish shows an healthy financial situation with considerable financial reserves in the form of Unit Trusts.

Sunday Morning

I celebrated and preached at both Sunday morning Masses, attending which there were large congregations who celebrated, along with the support of choirs and musicians, vibrant acts of worship. There were also good teams of altar servers who served with competence and reverence.

Following the 9.00am Mass I attended a Synodal Discussion Meeting over coffee and after the 11.00am Mass there was a Synodal Discussion Meeting over lunch, both of which were well attended by parishioners who had been at the celebration of Mass. At both meetings deep appreciation was

expressed for the ministry of Canon Mervyn. I outlined the current situation being experienced within the Archdiocese regarding the need for future planning, to take account of the falling number of priests available to serve the parishes of the diocese. This planning included the need for parishes to work more closely together, with a view to the need for possible future mergers of parishes. I mentioned that the impact of these changes was yet to be felt to a large degree in Oxford because of the availability of priests in the city to help with supply, but that in due course Oxford would be affected.

My impression was that the information I conveyed was not received with any surprise, but did raise some concerns. There was, however, an expression of willingness to adapt and support, conscious of the need to ensure that the priests available for service should not be overburdened to the detriment of their health.

The question was raised as to how the parish could best support and encourage young people to participate in the life of the parish, and it was acknowledged that there is no simple and straightforward answer to this question. I encouraged anyone who felt they could assist in this area to put themselves forward with their ideas.

The 'Called and Gifted' programme was mentioned. This is a discernment process that seeks to help people discern their charisms, or gifts, which they can then place at the service of the parish and the Church. This programme is being run in the parish and was enthusiastically recommended by those who had been involved.

A considerable number of parishioners stayed for both meetings and I am grateful for their time. From both meetings I gained a sense of the enthusiasm and commitment of parishioners, of their love for their parish community, their sense of belonging and their desire to support Canon Mervyn and the life of the parish.

Sunday Afternoon

Canon Mervyn drove me on a tour of the area covered by the parish to give me some idea of the kind of area covered. I also had the pleasure of the opportunity to visit Mgr. Bruce Harbert, Mgr. Vaughan Morgan and Fr. Aldo Tapparo, all of whom are priests resident in Diamon Court, near to the Parish Church.

In the evening I celebrated the 6.30 Mass, which was also well attended, and which brought the weekend to a conclusion.

Conclusion

It is clear from the encouraging attendance at all the Sunday Masses, and the expressions of interest and support of the parishioners, that this is a vibrant, prayerful and involved community and I would like to pay tribute to the parishioners and the Priest Priest. Canon Mervyn is an experienced and gifted Parish Priest, who displays the ability to engage, encourage and work with a large number of committed and enthusiastic parishioners. It is clear that the dedication to the life of the parish and its mission is deep-rooted, heartfelt and willingly given.

I am grateful to Canon Mervyn and the whole parish community for their kind welcome and engagement with the Parish Visitation Weekend.

+Richard Walker

6.10.2026