

Dear Parishioners

Hope and trust you are keeping well.

During Masses in Richmond and Motueka on Sunday 10 November, I announced to our congregations that I will soon be leaving the parish. This email is being sent to reach all our other parishioners.

Some of you might have heard that I was to return home to Malta in a couple weeks' time to visit family and have a break. What you will not know is that my Archbishop in Malta, Charles Scicluna, has in these past weeks communicated to me that he wants me to remain in my country, and will not be sending me back here after my break. Since he is my Archbishop and I am in New Zealand as a missionary priest, it is within his authority to make this decision. So my last day in the parish will be the 24<sup>th</sup> November, which gives us two more weeks.

Obviously, this news has made me quite sad, as it means I will be leaving you and it feels like I'm losing family and leaving behind people I've grown to love and cherish. But in the spirit of the Gospel, I also know that following Jesus requires a tremendous amount of trust, because His plan for us is sometimes unexpected, and asks that we move beyond the boundaries of what's familiar and comfortable.

So today I would like to thank each one of you for all that has been happening at Our Lady of the Bays in these past months. You have a share in the grace that has been part of God's work in the parish. Make sure you keep it flowing! I've been so blessed with having such wonderful parishioners, in such a welcoming parish, in such a beautiful part of the country. One cannot ask for more! This will be an indelible part of my memory for which I will be thankful as I pursue God's calling wherever else I'm sent. I take this opportunity to apologize for any wrong or slight or hurt I may have caused any of you. You will be in my prayer and kindly keep me in yours too.

As you have been so welcoming to me, you will surely also welcome Fr Ron Bennett who will replace me for the first two months after I leave. Fr Ron is a retired priest from Wellington who is currently one of the Spiritual Directors in Holy Cross Seminary in Auckland. He will be a caring shepherd to all of you. It's his first time in a parish up South, so he's very excited! He had to wait until retirement to get here so make sure he will remember this assignment for the right reasons!

I'm also sure that whoever comes after Ron will also be the right person. Options are currently being worked through by Archbishop Paul and the Vicar General Monsignor Gerard Burns. While this work is happening, we continue our path of parish life and as soon as this information becomes available, it will be widely communicated to the parish.

In all this change, let us not forget our Seminarian Emilio. He continues to be a strong and committed man of faith who has already shown his abilities and absolute commitment to us by leading Services of The Word with Eucharist and assisting with the comforting of families in their time of grief. Emilio is with us until Christmas Day 2024. Let us encourage him as he prepares to celebrate his Candidacy to the Priesthood in our parish in the coming weeks. This is a special step when Emilio will be officially accepted as a candidate for Holy Orders to become a Deacon and a Priest and thus conclude the last months of his formation.

Also keeping in mind what Archbishop Paul said during his Installation Mass in Wellington: "This is God's work we are doing. God gives us what we need, and it will be so much more than we would think, expect, or demand. So often we limit ourselves, but God doesn't do that. We are the Church together. If the Church is going to do anything it has to be we who do it. It is us – you and me, with our hangups and foibles, our talents and skills. We are living in challenging times, but the Good News is still that, and I have great trust in God at work, through each one of us" (Karori, 17 June 2023).

Sending my warmest regards.  
God bless you

Fr Michael