

Annual Parish Meeting – 22nd April 2026

Opening Prayer

The Annual Parish Meeting will begin with a prayer, during which I will share a message from Canon Chris.

Introductions

I will introduce members of the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) as well as Adam Simon, representing the Parish of Weybridge,

Review of 2025

The year 2025 was particularly difficult for the Churches of Esher and Thames Ditton. The ongoing shortage of priests in the diocese was exacerbated by the illness of our resident priest, Fr Sebastian. Four years ago, our two churches united to form a single parish, adapting to the reality of having just one priest. This change brought about a reduction in weekend Masses from six to four. Fortunately, Fr Sebastian established a capable staff team of four and set up the PPC to assist him in the management and pastoral care of the parish.

Fr Sebastian's Health and Parish Support

Since 15th August last year, Fr Sebastian has been on sick leave due to a severe illness, which almost proved fatal. He has now been discharged from hospital and is receiving support from his family. The parish community has shown remarkable solidarity, offered financial help and arranged transport for hospital visits. Fr Sebastian is keen to return to work and remains deeply invested in the churches, but those who have spoken with him believe a return—even part-time—is problematic. The parish continues to support him, and we must pray for a miracle that he recovers sufficiently to his priestly duties.

Transition to the Parish of Weybridge

In December last year, our parish became part of the Parish of Weybridge. This initiative, led by Bishop Moth, was intended to address the shortage of priests. While the new parish arrangement is still in its early stages, we were hopeful that the priests of the new parish would assist with weekend Mass coverage. However, this support has been minimal, as the priests continue serving their previous churches. It is unlikely that assistance will increase unless weekend Masses in other churches within the Parish of Weybridge are reduced. This is not a criticism, but rather a statement of fact reflecting the current situation. The transition has been further complicated by Bishop Moth's move to Westminster, resulting in a period of uncertainty until a successor is appointed.

Despite the limited assistance with weekend Masses, the new parish has provided valuable support in other areas. Molesey has taken on our RCIA candidates, priests have signed necessary forms, and invoices have been authorised. Nonetheless, until the new parish operates as a truly unified entity, substantial assistance cannot be expected.

Regarding weekend masses the diocese is helping pointing Sarah in the direction of Priests who are would be available, but she has to make the arrangements .

We are fortunate to have the support of Fr Benni, who we all know and Fr Stephen, a missionary from Kenya. They have generously made their services available, particularly in celebrating weekday Masses and serving as wise counsellors to the parish community.

The real problem is the hand to mouth existence which puts strain particularly Sarah

We have also trained six parishioners to be able to conduct 'The Liturgy of the Word with Holy Communion but we can conduct this service in emergencies . We will obey the rules on this but I cannot help but think that inevitably this rule will be relaxed .

Present and Future Outlook

We do not anticipate any significant change in the near future. The two churches continue to work together, and neither the PPC nor our staff wish for us to divide. Our unity makes us much stronger. The PPC effectively acts as a Board of Trustees overseeing the management of the parish, while the staff handle daily operations. The Chair, in particular, provides advice and support.

This collaborative approach has proved successful, even though there is no formal rulebook guiding our efforts. It is an ongoing process of learning and adaptation. PPC members are active and fully engaged, and staff work seamlessly together. Their contributions are invaluable and deserve recognition. Having previously been managed by a Parish Priest, the staff have had to adjust to following the guidance of a PPC, a PPC which lacks any formal recognition by the new diocese . Surely this must change !! Understandably, they ask who their boss is, and I cannot answer them . Personally, I wish to thank them for their patience and forbearance during this period of transition. But I wish the Parish of Weybridge and indeed the Diocese would look at their structures because it could be better organised .

Despite the difficulties our churches in many ways have flourished ; mass attendances have increased; we are running our sacramental programmes and there is increased involvement of parishioners as volunteers. We have run a Retreat and will run another later this year . There are times when we have received challenges where our lack of knowledge and experience left us anxious . But these challenges we have met .

Personally, I believe that the organisation of Parish life should move to the laity : we are now at a halfway stage. Priest of course continue to be at the heart of our Sacramental and Pastoral needs . And we should cherish and look after them .

The PPC and our staff are committed to the Catholic community of Esher and Thames Ditton . This is why we do what we do . My plea to our diocese is to properly recognise that the future of our Catholic Religion depends on a better sharing of responsibility between the Laity and Priests ,