



THE ARCHDIOCESE *of* BIRMINGHAM  
ONGOING FORMATION *for* CLERGY

*"I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you"*



NEWSLETTER

Issue 9 - September 2025

**Welcome to the autumn edition of our *Ongoing Formation for Clergy* Newsletter!**

As I write, the trees outside of the Vocations Office are changing colour and the leaves are beginning to fall to the ground. For many, autumn marks the beginning of a new academic year, and our sights perhaps begin looking towards the new liturgical year.

But don't look too far ahead, as there are a number of engaging events already in the Ongoing Formation calendar.

The **Conference for Deacons** will take place next Saturday (27<sup>th</sup> September) at St. Mary's College, Oscott. This will be an opportunity to reflect on how our parishes and communities can be safe places of welcome. It's not too late to book!

The first of our informal afternoon events will take place on Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> October. Entitled **Allegations: Supporting Priests with Fairness and Care**, this afternoon gathering will take place at St. Mary's College, Oscott from 2:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m. Led by Canon John Poland, this event will explore the journey from initial concerns and preliminary investigations, through ministry restrictions to demystifying the roles of the National Tribunal Service, safeguarding teams, canonical advocates and support persons. It is an opportunity to discover how justice, fairness and canonical support are organised.

Further afternoon sessions are also being planned for later this year, including Social Media and Spiritual Direction. We are also preparing for our next **Synod for Priests** at Woodland Grange from Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> to Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> June 2026. This biennial residential synod will take place at the familiar setting in Leamington and will build on the hugely successful Conference for Priests that took place at Birmingham Newman University in June. More details will follow, but please make a note of the date now.

I look forward to seeing many of you at these gatherings as we continue praying and supporting one another. Please do check the diary of events at the end of this newsletter for a full list of dates for upcoming events. Booking is essential to avoid disappointment.

Finally, I continue to encourage us all to pray for an increase in vocations to the priesthood, the diaconate and the religious life.

Please be assured of my ongoing prayers for you.

*Fr Craig*

Rev. Fr. Craig Szmidt  
Director of Ongoing Formation for Clergy

[www.vocations.org.uk/ongoing-formation](http://www.vocations.org.uk/ongoing-formation)



## INTERVIEW: FR. GERARD BOWEN

*Saturday 19th July saw St. Chad's Cathedral filled for the joyous occasion of Fr. Gerard Bowen's ordination of to the sacred priesthood. We asked Fr. Gerard to tell us about his experience as a transitional deacon in the new Vocational Synthesis Stage of formation, and also about his participation in Ongoing Formation for Clergy events during that time.*

The **Vocational Synthesis Stage** is a period whereby the seminarian has just been ordained a deacon and, rather than finishing his formation in the seminary, he instead ministers in a parish. I was ordained deacon in December 2024 and sent to the parish of Blessed Carlo Acutis in Wolverhampton. I see it as being apprenticed to a parish priest. I think it's a very worthwhile stage, as you're putting into practice all that you've been learning about in seminary.

You pick up more of the practicalities. In a classroom, you can be told something, but until you actually experience it, you don't know what you would do in that situation. In the Vocation Synthesis Stage, you're able to see priests at work: how they deal with the finances, how they deal with being called out at 3:00 a.m. (you experience first-hand the priest's tiredness); you see their interactions with the parishioners... you learn a lot about diplomacy!



*Archbishop Bernard sharing the Kiss of Peace with newly-ordained Fr. Gerard Bowen.*

If you were to remain in seminary as a deacon, you wouldn't get the chance to assist at and celebrate so many baptisms, weddings and funerals. I was able to do so, as well as take Holy Communion to the sick and to preach regularly. I also had a fantastic experience ministering in the hospital. Whilst I had valuable pastoral placements during my time in seminary, I think the Vocational Synthesis Stage helps builds confidence, because six years at seminary does feel like a long time. Pastoral placements are a worthwhile experience, but you're only getting a taste, and can only be of so much help. I certainly learnt a lot doing the prison placements, so they were definitely very valuable. But again, because you're not ordained, you are not quite as useful. You're only in those learning stages on a pastoral placement, but as an ordained deacon ministering in parish, you are able to do the work, rather that just shadowing or assisting. The Vocational Synthesis period eases the transition into being a priest.

When invited to the **Conference for Priests** in June, I was hesitant as to whether I should go – but I'm glad I did. I'm an alumnus of Newman University, so it was nice to go back and see the place (especially as my grandfather had a hand in building the lecture theatre we were in). It was great to be amongst my brother clergy and meet a good number of the priests of the diocese that didn't know, and to catch up with those I already knew. We began the day with Adoration and it was powerful to be in the chapel with so many priests and bishops praying together before the Blessed Sacrament.



I quite enjoyed the talks on the subject of the roots of synodality in the life of the priest. I thought Mgr. Paul McPartlan not only knew and presented on the topic incredibly well, but also defended and justified his position during questions.

A more relaxed gathering was the **Fraternity of the Recently Ordained** pilgrimage to Walsingham; it was a much smaller gathering as well. It was good to be able to talk with priests about their seminary experiences – it helped me make sense of my own experiences. The pilgrimage was a time to switch off. We were not in work mode... but you knew you were definitely with a group of priests! One of the things I really enjoyed was that these priests encouraged one another.

Whilst there, we spent time reading and discussing the papal document by Pope Francis on the Sacred Heart, *Dilexit nos*. I was fascinated to hear how priests had taken something different from the same piece of reading and it encouraged me in my devotion to the Sacred Heart.

I love Walsingham, as we used to go there every single year as a family. I have a lot of love for Our Lady of Walsingham: before I went to seminary in Valladolid, I went a pilgrimage there and I dedicated my seminary formation to her. It was so nice that, after being ordained a deacon, I was able to go back to Our Lady of Walsingham and say "thank you" to her for those years.



Members of the Fraternity of the Recently Ordained, away together on pilgrimage in Walsingham in March 2025.



## UPCOMING...

### ALLEGATIONS: SUPPORTING PRIESTS WITH FAIRNESS AND CARE

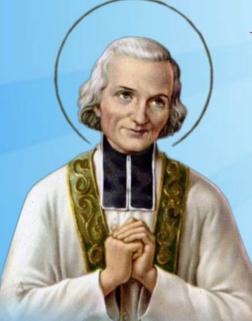
Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> October 2:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.

Facing an allegation is challenging. This Ongoing Formation event aims to provide some clarity and reassurance on the processes designed to address allegations. In addition to the presentations from Canon John Poland, there will be good time allotted for questions from the floor.

Canon John Poland is a priest of the Archdiocese of Liverpool, ordained in 2014. He is Operations Director of the National Tribunal Service, and has been Judicial Vicar of the first instance National Penal Tribunal of England and Wales since 2023. He also teaches Canon Law at Allen Hall seminary. He was private secretary to Archbishop Malcolm McMahon from 2019 to 2025. He completed a doctorate in Canon Law at the Gregorian University in 2019 and was a member of the Elliott Review, which looked at the safeguarding structures in the Church in England and Wales.

**AFCM VIANNEY MISSION'S**  
**INTERNATIONAL<sub>(ENGLISH)</sub>**  
**PRIESTS'**  
**PILGRIMAGE CONFERENCE**  
**IN MEDJUGORJE**





**PRIESTHOOD THE CELEBRATION OF JESUS' POWER**  
**2026 JULY**  
**20<sup>th</sup> - 24<sup>th</sup>**  
**MAGNIFICAT CENTER**  
Ulica Kraljice Mitra 106, Bijakovici, BiH-88266 Medjugorje  
BOOK YOUR SEATS: <https://afcmuk.org/register/>

Led by



**FR. XAVIER KHAN VATTAYIL PDM**  
Director, Anointing Fire Catholic Ministries




**FR. BINOY KARIMARUTHINKAL PDM**  
**BISHOP DAVID OAKLEY**  
Diocese of Northampton, UK

- TALKS
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- HOLY MASS AT THE SHRINE

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## DIOCESAN PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS

Heavenly Father,  
we ask you to send labourers  
into your harvest.

Inspire, in the hearts of your people,  
vocations to the priesthood, diaconate  
and religious life.

Bless our families with a spirit of generosity,  
so that those whom you call  
have the courage to give themselves  
to your Church in faith.

Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.





# SAFEGUARDING FORMATION

## FROM THE DIOCESAN SAFEGUARDING TEAM

Next year, following our two-yearly cycle, we have updated face-to-face safeguarding sessions. All clergy ministering in the Archdiocese of Birmingham will be expected to attend one session.

Booking details will be sent to clergy by the Safeguarding Team in due course, but for the time being, please put the dates in your diary.

- **Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2026**  
St. Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham
- **Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> June 2026**  
Immaculate Conception, Bicester
- **Friday 26<sup>th</sup> June 2026**  
Immaculate Conception, Bicester
- **Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> July 2026**  
St. Mary's College, Oscott  
(Particularly for working deacons)
- **Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> November 2026**  
St. Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham
- **Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> November 2026**  
Holy Trinity, Newcastle-under-Lyme
- **Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> January 2027**  
St. Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham

Each date will be limited to 60 clergy.

Let us **LOVE**  
not in word or speech, but in  
and  
**TRUTH** and **ACTION**  
1 John 3:18



The **Kenelm Youth Trust (KYT)** works in partnership with the Archdiocese of Birmingham to provide life-changing opportunities for young people to respond to the call of Jesus Christ in their lives. KYT oversees and brings together a wide variety of youth work undertaken in many settings across our parishes, retreat centres and school communities.

The philosopher Charles Taylor describes young people today as "*God positive agnostics*" and how interest in the transcendent is covered in a thick layer of cultural dust, but given the opportunity, questions from young people come alive. In a secular age, religious beliefs don't disappear; they sit alongside a multiplicity of beliefs and values. Taylor describes that there is a sense of a "*faint haunting*" – a persistent sense and a longing that there may be something out there.

One reflection, as we consider journeying synodally and living in this secular age, is hope. Young people are open and hungry and curious. We are seeing first-hand the "*Quiet Revival*": a surge in Church attendance (particularly amongst young men), a rise in the numbers of young people believing in God and a greater diversity in Church communities. The Church remains constant, and her unwavering faith is attractive.

We welcome every opportunity to work together with our priests and deacons to engage more young people, as they search for peace, a sense of purpose and meaning, belonging and community. The world can feel like a scary place – there is so much toxicity out there – and our Church offers the answers that many young people are searching for.

We welcome all our clergy to our next **Youth Ministry Conference**, exploring the pastoral needs of young people and how to accompany them, at **St. Mary's College, Oscott** on **Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2026**. Invitations will be sent out shortly.

Please ensure you are receiving our monthly newsletter, following us on socials and familiar with our website. Please take advantage of the training for volunteers in parish youth ministry, the resources, young adult groups, events and pilgrimages – all offering opportunities for young people in your communities.

**Maria Bracken**  
Youth Ministry Coordinator  
[www.kenelmyouthtrust.org.uk](http://www.kenelmyouthtrust.org.uk)



## MAIN EVENTS

**Saturday 27<sup>th</sup> September 2025 - THE CONFERENCE FOR DEACONS - St. Mary's College, Oscott \***  
Topics & Speakers: Safeguarding (Mrs. Claire Reay), Inclusion (Dcn. Mark Paine), Youth Ministry (Mrs. Maria Bracken)

**Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> - Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> June 2026 - THE SYNOD FOR PRIESTS - Woodland Grange \***  
"Helping priests to rediscover co-responsibility in the exercise of ministry"<sup>1</sup>

## CALENDAR OF EVENTS FOR 2025-2026

### SEPTEMBER

- Sat 27<sup>th</sup> - **THE CONFERENCE FOR DEACONS** - St. Mary's College, Oscott, B73 5AA - £40 individual / £60 with wife \*

### OCTOBER

- Sat 18<sup>th</sup> - **ONGOING FORMATION DAY FOR DEACONS: PREACHING** (Dr. Christine Dodd)  
- St. George, Worcester, WR1 1UG - £30\*
- Thurs 30<sup>th</sup> - **ALLEGATIONS: SUPPORTING PRIESTS WITH FAIRNESS AND CARE** (Canon John Poland JCD  
- Judicial Vicar, National Penal Tribunal of England & Wales) - St. Mary's College, Oscott, B73 5AA - £25
- Fri 31<sup>st</sup> - Sun 2<sup>nd</sup> Nov - **THE RETREAT FOR DEACONS** (Bp. Timothy Menezes) - Wistaston Hall, Crewe, CW2 8JS - £195

### NOVEMBER

- Sun 9<sup>th</sup> - Tues 11<sup>th</sup> - **FRATERNITY OF THE RECENTLY ORDAINED** - Woodland Grange, Leamington Spa, CV32 6RN  
- Free \*

### JANUARY

- Sat 10<sup>th</sup> - **ONGOING FORMATION DAY FOR DEACONS: INTEGRAL ECOLOGY** (Mr. Tom Piotrowski - Diocesan Trustee)  
- St. Mary's College, Oscott, B73 5AA - £30 \*

### JUNE

- Tues 16<sup>th</sup> - Thurs 18<sup>th</sup> - **THE SYNOD FOR PRIESTS** - Woodland Grange, B32 3NT - £395 \*
- Sat 20<sup>th</sup> - **ONGOING FORMATION DAY FOR DEACONS: CHAPLAINCY** - Venue TBC - £30 \*

### JULY

- Mon 6<sup>th</sup> - Fri 10<sup>th</sup> - **THE RETREAT FOR PRIESTS** - St. Mary's College, Oscott, B73 5AA - £395

*\* Attendance at these events is highly encouraged by His Grace, the Archbishop.*

*Fraternity of the Recently Ordained events are for diocesan priests ordained under 10 years.*

*Deacons ordained under 3 years are expected to attend **Ongoing Formation Days for Deacons**, but all are welcome.*

<sup>1</sup>Pathways for the Implementation of the Synod 2025-2028, §2.1a, quoting the Final Document, §74

For further details on these events and to book, visit:

[www.vocations.org.uk/ongoing-formation](http://www.vocations.org.uk/ongoing-formation)



We are able to accept payments online by debit or credit card, via BACS, or by cheque. All Ongoing Formation for Clergy events are legitimate parish expenses. They are free-of-charge for retired clergy.