

FRANCESCO ARESCO

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Candidate for the House of Clergy, Diocese of London

Proposer The Revd Prebendary Dr Julie Gittoes, Area Dean of Barnet

Seconded The Revd Dagmar Wilkinson, Rector of St John's, Friern Barnet

This is the first time I have stood for General Synod.

I am the Rector of St Mary the Virgin, Monken Hadley, on the edge of Barnet. I am Dean for Growing Younger in the Edmonton Area and a foundation governor of our church primary school. I am also finishing a doctorate in Divinity at Cambridge, and I belong to the Cambridge Centre for the Study of Platonism and to the London Society for the Study of Philosophy of Religion.

I am Sicilian, and I read Classics at Bologna and then at UCL before turning to theology. I was then a pastoral assistant in the North London Pastoral Assistants Scheme, working at St Michael's, Camden Town, and one day a week alongside the chaplain at the Huntley Centre, the acute psychiatric inpatient unit at St Pancras Hospital. It was on that ward that I truly appreciated what it means to be with someone, with no pretence of fixing them. Afterwards, as a Sheppard Scholar at St Martin-in-the-Fields, I learned both how a church can order its common life around people who are homeless and on the margins, and how it can keep alive a spirit of enquiry and a habit of wonder. I was curate at St Mary-at-Finchley, and much of what I know about the ordinary trade of a parish priest I learned there.



WHY I AM STANDING

There are three things I would want the next Synod to attend to.

PARISHES, AND DIOCESES

God became a particular man, Jesus of Nazareth, in a particular place, among particular people. This is the shape of the Gospel, it ought to be the shape of the Church, and it is certainly the shape of the parish. A parish is a place where the living God is proclaimed here and not somewhere else, and where the life of the place is shaped by belonging to him. Every person in England lives in a parish, and at the heart of this legal and geographic fact is the promise our Church has made to the nation, so that the cure of souls is exercised somewhere or it is not exercised at all.

Most of my week is the week of an ordinary parish priest. It is a funeral visit, a school assembly, a boiler appointment, a couple preparing for marriage, a cup of tea with a churchwarden.

We are raising money to rebuild our church hall, and I now know more than I ever wished to know about grant applications, professional fees and VAT. A great deal is asked of parishes and rather less is offered to them. Money moves quickly towards what is new and time limited, and slowly, if at all, towards a church that is faithful and expensive to keep standing.

I do not believe that dioceses are the villains in the story. They are under the same pressures as the rest of us. A diocese carrying a deficit, falling share, ageing congregations and a great many roofs is asked to plan clergy numbers years ahead on figures nobody can rely upon. When national money appears, it usually arrives as time-limited funding for which the diocese must bid, and which then must be reported on. So energy goes into bidding, and afterwards into reporting, and the parish meets the result as one more initiative to absorb.

This is a system that funds projects rather than sustaining ministry, and it is making everybody inside it anxious. I would want the next Synod to treat the parish as the thing being funded, rather than as what is left over when everything more interesting has been paid for.

I see the same pattern through Growing Younger. Work with children and families rests on a small number of tired people, and when funding is present it arrives through specific projects and initiatives that are not tailored around the parishes that most need help in engaging with young families.

If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

1 CORINTHIANS 12.26

THOSE AT THE MARGINS

To stand with people at the margins is not to resolve them into a programme, nor to issue slogans on their behalf. Both are ways of not being present. It is to be with them, and sometimes to make choices that are difficult and uncomfortable, and to make them anyway.

So I believe the Church is for everyone, and I mean in every role and at every level, not only in the welcome at the door. Disability, neurodiversity, mental health, learning disability, race, sex, gender identity, sexuality, and how much money a person has: none of these should decide whether someone may belong amongst us, be trusted with responsibility, be ordained, or be considered for senior office. Where our structures still create barriers for people, whether in law or by settled habit, I would vote to remove them.

I know that people of deep faith read some of this differently from me. I would rather sit with that disagreement honestly than pretend it away.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

I think the Church has largely lost the habit of theological reflection, and that we are poorer for it in our worship and in our policy alike. It has been substituted by a therapeutic language of wellbeing, flourishing and journey, on the one hand, which sounds kind and commits us to nothing, and, on the other, a sloganeering biblical literalism, which sounds certain and thinks rather less. Recent policy documents and statements have frequently run aground on one side or the other. Both impoverish our common life, and both produce poor policy, because policy made without theology is only management with a prayer at the beginning.

My doctoral work is on Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. What drew me to him is his conviction that theology speaks truly in images rather than in flattened propositions, and that the human person carries an extraordinary dignity precisely because she is not fixed and finished. I mention it only because it is where I learned to distrust thin language about God and about people.

This is not an eccentric position but classical Anglicanism. Hooker wrote at length and against the temper of his own age by insisting that scripture alone does not settle every question of the Church's order, and that reason and received wisdom have their part. Patient theological reflection, scriptural and attentive to the actual place we find ourselves in, is not an ornament of the Anglican tradition but the Anglican tradition and should inform the way that our Synod thinks and shapes the future of Christ's Church.

WHAT I WOULD DO

- I would ask of every new initiative who is expected to deliver it, and whether they were asked first.
- I would press for the cost of central programmes to be published beside what parishes actually receive.
- I would argue for national funding to be available as sustained support for existing ministry and not only as competitive short term bids, which is as much in the interest of dioceses as of parishes.
- I would vote for the full inclusion of people in same-sex relationships in the life and ministry of the Church, and for the equal place of women at every level of it.
- I would work with anyone in Synod, of whatever tradition, to strengthen theological education and the funding of parishes.
- And I would read the papers, turn up, listen carefully and contribute meaningfully.

FINALLY

I am standing because the questions before the next Synod are not, in the end, financial or managerial. They are questions about our calling: how we think, how we hold what has been handed to us, and how we face the injustices that wound our common life.

I would be grateful for your first preference vote, and I would be glad to answer anything you would like to put to me.