

A PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP OF LANCASTER



Fourth Sunday of Easter 2022, Good Shepherd Sunday

APPOINTED TO BE READ AT ALL PUBLIC MASSES IN ALL CHURCHES AND CHAPELS IN THE DIOCESE OF LANCASTER ON THE WEEKEND OF May 8th 2022

My dear people,

It is customary for me to address you on this Fourth Sunday of Eastertide with a Pastoral Letter on the subject of Vocations to the Priesthood and Consecrated Life. Whilst all are called to the same eternal life in Christ, the same heaven, we know that within the Church there are various vocations ordered to the building up of the Body of Christ.

On many occasions Jesus speaks of how His disciples are to live their vocation. The role of shepherding is given to us as an outstanding example of how we are to show leadership and pastoral care. When we reflect on the relationship of the shepherd and the sheep, we are given a deep insight into the heart of Jesus. This is a theme relevant to every age and situation, even though particular circumstances will vary greatly. The key to all vocations is to set our hearts on knowing Christ.

Since its foundation in 1924, the Diocese of Lancaster has been richly blessed with vocations to the Priesthood. Please continue to pray for men to hear and answer generously and courageously the call to the Priesthood. Please continue to pray for men and women to hear and answer the Lord's call to follow Him joyfully in the Religious and Consecrated life.

We live in a world of bewilderingly rapid change, filled with many voices. There is much that is disturbing and confusing us, not only the war in Ukraine, pandemic, climate, inflation and identity issues. We must make space and time in our lives to step aside and listen carefully, without distractions, to the voice of the Good Shepherd. How reassuring it is to hear Him say of His sheep, ***'I know them and they follow me'***. What a comfort it is to hear Him say, ***'They will never be lost, and no one will steal them from me'***.

As you are already aware, we have many priests who are retired or approaching retirement age, although they will live their priesthood to the completion of their days. I thank them for their years of faithful service. Faced with fewer active clergy we must make the necessary adjustments in our parishes so that pastoral care is still available. Fewer clergy does not lessen the Church's presence or effectiveness. What is needed is for our lay Faithful to become more engaged with work in our parishes and schools perhaps previously done by clergy and religious, but not specifically restricted to their vocation. Thus, an important part of the work of priests is to help you to know and carry out your own vocations as Baptised Catholics. You often hold a professionalism and great experience which differs from that of our clergy. I am grateful to my predecessors for the work they have done in various ways to highlight this need

and to help bring it about. I have a real concern for my priests as they find themselves continually stretched to meet the pastoral demands of today in all their complexities.

Let us pray for and encourage those men who are already in formation in the seminaries. We also pray for those who have come forward and are actively discerning their vocation. Others have yet to hear that gentle call from our Lord to follow Him as little shepherds, serving with His Heart.

In the autumn we will welcome to the Diocese the relics of Saint Bernadette Soubirous, the little shepherdess of Lourdes. Her own time looking after the family's sheep at Bartres was a time of intimate formation in the ways of Christ. I encourage all of you to know her story in more detail, and to pray close to her relics when they are with us in Saint Peter's Cathedral and then in the church of Our Lady and Saint Joseph, Carlisle. Her life holds a wonderful example from which we can learn the art of prayerful listening. After listening comes the art of answering. After answering comes the exquisite experience of knowing how much we are loved by Him who calls us to share His life, the life of the Blessed Trinity. Let us set our hearts on listening and on answering the Lord's call, and then let Him lead us in whichever way He chooses, confident that He knows best.

I send this with my prayers for yourselves and your families at this time, and with my deep gratitude for your prayers. These are the times and circumstances in which our Blessed Lord asks us to live our vocations. They may not be the times we would have chosen. We find consolation when we simply hear Him say, *'I know you; follow me'*. He takes us on the way to heaven.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+Paul Swarbrick." The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

+Paul Swarbrick.

Bishop of Lancaster