

A LETTER FROM THE RT REV MARK O'TOOLE

BISHOP OF PLYMOUTH

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,



Ever since the age of 17 the Lord has exercised a particular attraction over my heart, no other can replace. That attraction, the sense of being drawn to Him and wanting to respond in a concrete way through service of others, we describe as a Vocation. Today, we hear of the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for us. The Lord invites each of us to a particular following of Him whether that is in marriage, the priesthood, religious life or as a single person living generously for others. I want to share with you some reflections on this topic of vocation, especially vocations to the priesthood.

We all know that without the priesthood there is no Mass; without the Mass, there will be no Church. For this reason, priestly vocations are everyone's business. Since coming to the diocese it has been a joy to ordain one priest for the diocese and I look forward to ordaining two others this summer. At the same time, in that period, I have conducted the funerals of 5 priests. It is one of the moments when we see and hear of the vital place that a priest has played in people's lives.

We have all seen that there are increasing pressures on priests as they shepherd several communities. Thankfully, in this diocese, apart from the two to be ordained in the summer, there are three other seminarians in formation for priesthood, and three others who will, hopefully, go to seminary in the next year or so.

For most young Catholics the call of God is going to be to married life. We must do all we can to help prepare them for that vocation. We can also be certain that some of our young people are being called by God to lives of special service in the Church - to priesthood and to religious life. It is particularly challenging to present the commitment of these vocations in the context of contemporary culture. Without support, these vocations will often go unheeded

What is the problem? Is God calling fewer people? I think not. God is still calling; but many are not able to discern His call. When a vocation goes unanswered it is not only a sadness for the one who does not respond, but also a sadness for the entire Church which has just lost another priest. God, in His loving Providence, gives to the Church all the gifts she needs. The challenge today is not a lack of vocations, but rather a lack of responses.

Many of us are unaware of what priesthood is about: the wonder and awe of making Christ present in our midst. A priest lends his voice to Christ who says at each Mass: "This is my Body. This is my Blood." It is the priest who is an instrument of Jesus' Mercy in the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. What a great privilege it is to visit the sick, and

to pray, "Through this Holy Anointing, may the Lord in His love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit."

We all need to promote vocations in the Church. Our goal must be to instil in our young people such a love and appreciation for the sacraments and the priesthood that they will not only consider a vocation themselves, but also encourage their peers to be open to such a path. Too many vocations fall by the wayside due to peer pressure. Parents, priests, catechists and teachers all have a part to play in encouraging vocations in our parishes, our schools, and in the accompaniment we offer our young people. I would hope, especially, that in our efforts to reach out to others through our evangelisation initiatives that we will increase a culture of vocations discernment in the diocese. Not to do so, would be to fail our young in providing the climate needed where they can properly be in touch with the attraction that the Good Shepherd exercises over their hearts.

We cannot limit the horizons of our children by asking only, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" We must also ask "and what do you think God wants you to be?" We must help our young look beyond careers and professions and answer a call from God to be holy, whether that holiness is to be lived out in marriage, in priesthood, in the permanent diaconate, in religious life, or in service of others. In baptism, we are all called to holiness of life. A vocation to priesthood or religious life is a call to a radical form of discipleship that aspires to follow Jesus' teachings and example ever more closely.

I ask you to join me in storming heaven with our prayers for these vocations. The vital link between the Eucharist and the priesthood is clear, so Eucharistic adoration especially is a wonderful form of prayer for vocations. I would ask that a conscious effort is made to emphasize prayer for vocations as an important element in the Eucharistic adoration and Holy Hours that take place throughout the Diocese. The Curé of Ars, St John Vianney, once said: "If we truly understood the priesthood, we would die, not of fear, but of love." May we discover this great truth each day in grateful adoration before our Eucharistic Lord.

I ask you to pray in thanksgiving for our priests. We thank God, too, for the gift of our seminarians. As we continue to keep them in our prayers, we pray also that many others will be open to hearing Christ's call in their lives and especially that many will be willing to offer themselves for the priesthood in our diocese.

Also today, I am asking you to take home the leaflet you will receive. This explains the need we have to provide for our seminarians, now and into the future. Please read it carefully and in prayer. Any help you are able to offer will aid one of these young men towards priesthood.

Thank you for all the support you already give and I ask you, too, to please keep me in your prayer.

Yours devotedly,

Rt Rev Mark O'Toole

Bishop of Plymouth

Sunday 26th April 2015