



Pastoral Letter
to be read at all Masses
in the Archdiocese of Liverpool
on the Fourth Sunday of Easter
Vocations Sunday
24/25 April 2021

Dear Friends,

Today is traditionally known as Vocations Sunday or Good Shepherd Sunday as, in today's gospel reading, Jesus says, 'I am the Good Shepherd: the good shepherd is the one who lays down his life for his sheep'. Jesus's listeners, although very familiar with the image that Jesus is using, would be startled by his use of this imagery with reference to himself. Shepherds lived on the margins of society and were treated with suspicion. What on earth is Jesus doing? Well, in the first place, he has made his listeners ears prick up and then, by identifying with certain qualities of the good shepherd, he is showing us clearly the mission he has received from his Father: to gather us into one flock, to know each of us individually, to protect us and to lay down his life for us. Jesus takes this on freely but also predicts his resurrection.

I want to ask you to reflect on your vocation because this gospel applies to every one of us, not simply those who are called to serve in the Church as priests, deacons or religious. By baptism we have been gathered into one flock and called to holiness. That call is unique to each of us; the Good Shepherd knows his sheep and they know him, and furthermore Jesus, through his death and resurrection, has opened for us the way to eternal life with his Father.

Our particular journey through life in response to God's loving purpose for us is different from the person sitting next to us. Some of us live out our vocation in a particular way such as by being married and having a

family. Others will live in a religious community. Many people respond to the call to holiness through the work they do, perhaps as a teacher or in a caring profession. There are as many ways of hearing God's call and answering it as there are people on this earth. Our responsibility as Christians is to listen to God's word and hear how he is calling us individually. Although the call is particular to each of us, the way we as a community find holiness is through each other in the church, becoming one in Christ and by being Christ to the wider world. Holiness is not confined to the church. We have seen numerous examples of this throughout the pandemic in the service which individuals have given to others. The ultimate sacrifice has been paid by many NHS workers who cared for infected patients with selfless love and fatally caught the virus themselves, but many others in every part of our society have reached out to offer help and support to isolated people they did not know before the lockdown. Volunteers are stepping forward to make our churches safe, to train as vaccinators, to steward the vaccination centres and to get their neighbour's shopping. These practical actions are signs of the communion that characterises the human person and, dare I say, speak of holiness, as they are a sign for us of the unity that we strive for under Christ, the Good Shepherd.

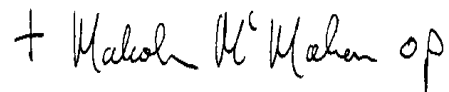
It is therefore essential that we allow the Holy Spirit an opportunity to work in and through us. By doing so we are able to understand more fully the life to which we're called. Be in no doubt that if we accept that the Spirit is at work, every one of us is called to a particular Vocation. As an archdiocese we have been opening ourselves to that same Spirit as we move towards our Archdiocesan Synod in June this year. The future of our church here in the Archdiocese of Liverpool depends on every one of us discerning our individual vocation and following it in truth; and we should not let any mistakes in the past or a feeling of unworthiness hold us back. Pope Benedict noted several years ago that "Weaknesses and human limits do not present obstacles, as long as they help to make us more aware of the fact that we need the redeeming grace of Christ."

I pray that some of you may have specific calls to priesthood, religious life and the diaconate. The ordained ministry and religious life are necessary for a healthy church. Just as it is really impossible to have a church without the mass, so I believe it is also unthinkable to be a church without men and women religious, contemplative and active, who have laid down their lives in service.

If I were to give you statistics of the falling numbers of vocations you would be quite shocked and worried, suffice it for me to say that the church is changing, and we should not be afraid of what the future holds - Jesus tells us that the Good Shepherd knows his own and they him. That should be enough assurance for us to face what lies ahead with bold hearts.

Please pray that the Lord will continue to provide shepherds for his flock and that you may continue to be supported by his love as you follow your vocation.

Wishing you and your families every blessing in this Easter season,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Malcolm McMahon OP". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Most Rev Malcolm McMahon OP

Archbishop of Liverpool

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