



**Pastoral Letter of the Bishop of Nottingham
appointed to be read at all Masses
celebrated on the First Sunday of Advent
Saturday 26 / Sunday 27 November 2016**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As one particular way of keeping alive some of the graces and blessings that we received during the Jubilee of Mercy, I want to speak to you today about the importance of prayerful support for the priests, deacons and religious working in our Diocese. As we begin our new liturgical year, I would like to encourage a time of intensified prayer, that more young men and women will hear and respond generously to God's call to serve him.

Throughout the Year of Mercy, we have been reminded that the priest is called to make visible, by his words and actions, the unbounded love of God. He is to speak to others, of what he himself knows – of a God who is deeply in love with us and whose mercy is boundless. This essential role of a priest in the life of the Church has been well expressed by Pope Francis, when he said that, 'Wherever God's people have desires or needs, there is the priest, who knows how to listen and feels a loving mandate from Christ... the joy of being taken from the people we love and then being sent back to them as dispensers of the gifts and counsels of Jesus, the one Good Shepherd.'¹

Joy is a key aspect in the life and ministry of one who strives to serve God and his people as a priest, and the same is also true of a deacon or religious. When I was growing up, I was fortunate, as an altar server, to have contact with two and sometimes three priests who worked in the local parish. From my young perspective, the priests always seemed to be happy, full of fun, relaxed and with time to chat and

¹ FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 253.

crack a few jokes. It was an attractive picture of priesthood that these priests presented, and it was one to which I was eventually drawn.

Now, many years later, I am concerned about what picture of priesthood we priests may, unintentionally, be presenting to the young of today. What do they see when they look at us? The working context of a priest is now so very different. Most of our priests, as you know, live by themselves; many of them have care of more than one parish and sometimes several churches, and many also have diocesan responsibilities. My concern is that we cannot really expect the young today to hear and answer God's call to serve him as a priest if they see only stress and tiredness on the face of their priest, and do not see clearly, or at all, the inner joy that is experienced by every priest who is doing his best to serve Our Lord, and who feels God's guidance, strength and love in his daily ministry.

This is something for me as your Bishop, and for all priests, to reflect upon; but you, my dear people, can play a most important part in helping our priests to have a more balanced approach to their priestly ministry, so that they can better express their sense of joy and fulfilment. How? Priests, like everyone else, are affected by the expectations that people have of them, and also by the sense of partnership, feedback and encouragement that they receive. So, please expect of your priests, and encourage them, always to be men of prayer, deep faith and joy; to devote themselves generously each week to prayerful reflection upon the Scriptures and the preparation of their homilies and talks; to take their day off and holidays, and to look after their health and well-being. Please give them plenty of constructive feedback, and let them know if you found something helpful in a homily or talk. We all need encouragement, and priests are no different. So, please share with them your ideas about what you would like to see developed in your parish, and be willing to take initiatives or join in parish projects. Let us make our relationship as priests and parishioners a real partnership – all of us, in our varying ways, doing our best to serve the Lord and one another. This will help strengthen the morale of priests, and better enable us to present a truer and more attractive picture of priesthood today, to which, please God, many more young men will feel drawn.

While it is encouraging that we currently have six young seminarians studying to serve as priests for the Diocese, the reality is that our missionary work would be strengthened enormously if we had more young men and women responding to the Lord's call to serve him as priests, deacons and religious. And so to all our young people, in our parishes, schools and university chaplaincies, I say: if you think the Lord may be calling you, be open and generous in your response, and I promise you the Lord will always be at your side to help, guide and empower you through his Holy Spirit.

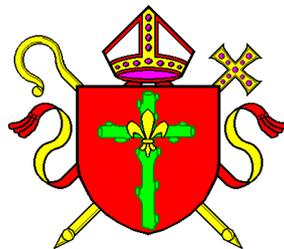
I also ask that, throughout our Diocese, everyone, young and old, especially the housebound, joins me in praying regularly for more vocations to the priesthood, the permanent diaconate and religious life, asking that many more young men and women will hear and respond generously to the Lord who is still calling people to serve him in these ways. I ask that we pray daily for vocations, at home and in church. I would like there be a bidding prayer for vocations at every Sunday Mass, and a monthly Holy Hour or time of Eucharistic Adoration for vocations in every parish, chaplaincy and religious house. Prayer cards and support material of this kind have been produced and sent out across the Diocese, along with posters with photos of our six seminarians. Shortly, a prayer calendar for 2017 will be sent out with the names of all our priests, permanent deacons, seminarians and religious working in the Diocese, so that we can pray for them and thank God for their ministry and vocation. There will, of course, be many blank slots on the calendar, which will serve to remind us that we need more young people to step forward to take the places of those of our priests and religious who are close to retirement or who have now retired. Appropriate age-related material will also go to schools in the New Year, so that we can encourage our children and young people to think seriously about a vocation to the priesthood and religious life.

This Season of Advent is divided into two periods. From today until 16th December, the Church directs our gaze beyond the First Coming of Christ to his Second Coming in glory. The second period, from 17th December until Christmas Eve, directs our gaze towards the First Coming of Christ in his Birth at Bethlehem. Advent truly is a season of joyful and spiritual expectation. It is therefore a providential time to begin afresh our prayer throughout the Diocese for more vocations to the priesthood, permanent diaconate and religious life.

May our loving and merciful Saviour bless you and all your loved ones. Please pray for me and I will pray for you.

+ Patrick

Rt Rev Patrick McKinney
Bishop of Nottingham



**Bishop's House
Nottingham**

November 2016