

Dear Brother and Sisters in Christ

Earlier this month, on the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Year for Priests drew to a close. Pope Benedict had asked the Church to dedicate a year, beginning in June 2009, to prayer and reflection on the gift of the priesthood. It has given us an opportunity to look again towards Jesus himself, the great High Priest, who has offered the perfect sacrifice to his Father so that we might become holy.

In the course of this year we have given thanks for the way that our Lord shares his priesthood within the Church. Through our baptism we are a priestly people, making an offering of our service day by day. As I begin to know the diocese better I see many examples of this, especially in the worship and liturgical life of parish communities, in the mission of our schools, and in the many and varied pastoral initiatives that reach out to those most in need of help.

All of this is enabled, encouraged and enhanced by the witness and work of the priests of our diocese. This year has helped us especially to thank our Lord for the particular expression of his priesthood in the life and service of each individual priest. He has chosen quite a variety of personalities and characters in whom we can see different and complementary reflections of the one priesthood of our Lord.

During this year we have prayed every day for one of the priests living and working in the diocese, and I know how much our priests have valued these prayers. Many have spoken with gratitude of the letters and phone calls they received reminding them of your prayers and appreciation for their vocation. I too thank you for your prayers in support of our priests.

As the Year for Priests closes I thank all our priests for their love of Christ as the foundation of their lives, their dedication in serving all God's people and their friendship and support for one another which bears such fruit within the diocese, not least in encouraging vocations.

In this Sunday's readings we can hear echoes in the ministry of Elijah of the call to priestly service. At the Lord's prompting Elijah goes to find a "prophet to succeed" him. Elijah's ministry as prophet is to continue for the benefit of the people and so "Elijah passed near to [Elisha] and threw his cloak over him." In the same way the priesthood of our Lord has to touch every generation and he has thrown his mantle over those ordained as priests.

Elisha's first response is both enthusiastic and hesitant – he wants to follow Elijah but finds it hard to cut the ties with his old way of life. Those who are thinking about the priesthood may experience a similar dilemma as our Lord calls them to a new way of life. We pray that they may be generous and wholehearted in their response to Christ's invitation – they need never feel hesitant about the happiness it brings. I hope that they will feel encouraged to attend the Invocation event at St Mary's College, Oscott next weekend.

St Luke's Gospel shows us an important turning point in our Lord's own life and ministry: "As the time drew near for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely took the road to Jerusalem." As the great moment of his priestly sacrifice approached the direction of our Lord's life was set. In a similar way the Lord sets the

direction of a man's life at its deepest level when he is ordained as priest. The rest of his life and ministry is a resolute following along the path marked out by Christ.

As the Year for Priests has shown this is not a solitary journey, for just as on the road to Jerusalem there are companions on the way, those with whom we share all or part of the road. The communities served by our priests are also the communities who encourage and sustain them. Priests lead others to follow the Lord by resolutely following him themselves.

This Tuesday, the feast of St Peter and St Paul, I shall be a pilgrim in Rome and I shall pray at the tomb of the Apostles for all the priests and deacons, religious men and women and lay-faithful of our diocese. I shall pray especially, and with gratitude, for our life and mission together as that part of the Lord's flock now entrusted to my care.

As a symbol of that care the Holy Father will place the pallium on my shoulders. This little woollen vestment is a reminder of the bonds of love and obedience that unite us with the Successor of Peter and of the responsibility entrusted to me to serve the priests and people of our diocese. As the Year for Priest closes, I hope that I may always serve God's people faithfully especially through giving time and support to our priests.

Please pray for me this Tuesday as I receive the pallium. Pray also for our priests who wear the mantle of Christ, the Good Shepherd. May we resolutely follow Christ together, and as the summer approaches may you find opportunities to be refreshed and renewed, priests and people of God alike.

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