

PASTORAL LETTER ON DIOCESAN PRIESTHOOD FOR VOCATIONS SUNDAY 8 MAY 2022

“The harvest is rich, but the labourers are few.” (Luke 10:2).

A TIME OF CHANGE AND CHALLENGE

Pope Francis has said that this is not just a time of change but a change of time. But in such a time of change and challenge, the Holy Father has urged the whole church to face the future with trust *“The situations that we are living in today therefore pose new challenges which, at times, are also difficult for us to understand. Our time requires us to live problems as challenges and not as obstacles: the Lord is active and at work in our world.”*¹

A YEAR OF PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS

This time of challenge is an opportunity for us to rediscover the gift of calling, of vocation, and for us to realise how many gifts and charisms are at work already in the diocese of Derry. As a Diocesan Church, we have to face this new reality together. At the invitation of the Diocesan Vocations Council, I decided to launch a Year of Prayer for Vocations to the diocesan priesthood, beginning at the Vigil Mass for St Patrick’s Day this year, and ending on 17 March 2023. Throughout history, God has always called people to face current realities with courage and not just to lament the changing times.

THE DIOCESE OF DERRY IN 2022

At present the diocese of Derry is comprised of 51 parishes in Derry city, most of County Derry, the parishes of northwest Tyrone, and 10 parishes in County Donegal. There are currently 70 priests in full-time ministry serving the pastoral and spiritual needs of the people of those parishes in 94 churches and other parish settings. A number of steps have already been taken to ensure that all the people of the diocese will have a priest or priests available to say Mass, hear Confessions, anoint the sick and dying, and officiate at baptisms, weddings and funerals, as well as carrying out many other duties, including school chaplaincy and the preparation of children for the sacraments of First Confession, First Holy Communion, and Confirmation. This means that some of our priests are now serving in multiple-parish settings. In many places where there used to be up to four priests there is now perhaps only one. In other parishes where there used to be one or two priests there is now perhaps no resident priest, and the parishes in question are being served from outside of their traditional boundaries.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF RELIGIOUS ORDERS

¹ [Pastoral Visit - Florence: Meeting with the participants in the 5th Convention of the Italian Church \(Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, 10 November 2015\) | Francis \(vatican.va\)](#)

Furthermore, a huge amount of work was undertaken by communities of religious women and men who have made an enormous contribution to education, social care and health services. And history shows that church renewal has never come without communities of radical young men and women who have dedicated their lives to proclaiming Christ by their life and work.

A VARIETY OF MINISTRIES AND VOCATIONS

As we face the current challenges, God is still calling individuals to dedicate their lives to the many ministries in the church – ordained priesthood, the diaconate, consecrated life and other lay ministries. Our diocese will be healthy only when - as often in the past – we are open to all the gifts of the Holy Spirit and are rich in ministries.

PRAYING FOR VOCATIONS

The Lord has invited us to pray that labourers will take up the task of ministering to God's people. As followers of Christ, we believe in the power of prayer. We believe that God listens to our prayers, and we know that God will answer our prayers. It has been said that 80% of vocations come from the 20% of parishes where people are actively praying for that intention. How rich will the harvest be in this diocese when all our parishioners are praying that those whom the Lord is calling to serve as priests and religious will respond generously to His invitation! By encouraging a culture of prayer for vocations throughout the diocese it is my fervent wish that each one of us, bishop, priests, religious, consecrated and lay will more readily discern and respond to God's call in our lives.

THE HOLY FAMILY AS MODELS OF PRAYER

A vocation to the priesthood or religious life is cultivated first and foremost in the home, sometimes called "the domestic Church", when parents live up to the promises made at their child's baptism by teaching them to pray, praying with them and attending together the celebration of Mass and the sacraments. We look to the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph as the outstanding model of faithful family life, and we ask Our Blessed Mother and St Joseph to guide and inspire all of us, the people of the diocese of Derry, in the undertaking of this Year of Prayer for Vocations.

ENCOURAGING PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS IN THE DIOCESE

The Diocesan Vocations Council have already begun to celebrate a monthly Holy Hour for Vocations. Until the end of the summer these will take place in St Mary's Church, Creggan, Derry. Everyone is welcome to attend them in person, or to pray at home via the parish webcam. Beginning in September the Holy Hours will be celebrated in, and broadcast from, different parishes throughout the diocese. The locations will be published in parish and diocesan websites, as will the other initiatives of the Vocations Council during the course of this Year of Prayer.

I would ask that prayers for Vocations be offered regularly in all of our parishes. This is already happening in some places in the form of a weekly Rosary, or where an hour of prayer during Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is dedicated to this intention. Some parishes, or individual parishioners or groups (for instance, the St Vincent de Paul Society, the Legion of Mary, St Joseph's Young Priests' Society, Cursillo, Youth Groups or Prayer Groups) may decide to offer up a period of prayer and fasting for the wide range of vocations in our diocese – for married couples and families, for the religious men and women of the diocese, for women in consecrated life, for those who are single, as well as for priests, deacons, seminarians, and those discerning their vocation in life.

VOCATIONS IN OUR DIOCESE - AN ANSWER TO PRAYER

The prayers of those who have already been praying for an increase in priestly and religious vocations have been, and are being, answered. Currently, we have 5 men in formation, one of whom will be ordained a deacon today, 8 May, Vocations Sunday. Please God, another will be ordained a deacon next month. Our Diocesan Vocations Council are working with a number of men who are discerning their vocation, and these are being mentored by some of the priests of the diocese.

THE DIOCESAN PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS

This Year of Prayer for Vocations will encourage co-responsibility and co-ownership among all of us in the work of promoting Vocations. I commend to you the Diocesan Prayer for Vocations, and ask that you pray it regularly. I ask the priests of the diocese to print the Prayer in their parish newsletters and to post it on their websites and social media channels.

We remember that it was the Lord Jesus Himself who said, *"...ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers into His harvest."* And so we pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, gentle shepherd,
you know your sheep, and you know how to reach their hearts.
Give to the people of the diocese of Derry
hearts that are open to the call of the Holy Spirit.
Speak to the hearts of the faithful men and women of our diocese, that they may
hear your call to follow you and serve your people as priests, consecrated religious
and consecrated virgins.
Awaken in them the courage to answer: "Here I am, Lord. Send me."

St. Eugene, pray for us. St. Columba, pray for us. St. John Vianney, pray for us.