RC DIOCESE OF EAST ANGLIA

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PASTORAL LETTER
of
BISHOP ALAN HOPES
for the
FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
2022

This Letter is to be read at all Masses celebrated in the Diocese during the weekend May 7/8.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today is commonly known as *Good Shepherd Sunday* because in today's Gospel, Jesus claims to be *the* Shepherd who looks after his sheep.

How important it is for us to remember this truth! Our God is not the clockmaker god of the post-Enlightenment philosophers who winds up the world and then leaves it to

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its own devices. Nor is he the capricious despot of the ancient Greek and Roman gods. Nor is he some impersonal force of nature that directs this universe to no apparent end. No, he is a shepherd - someone who sees us and cares personally about us, someone who guides us with an unfailing hand, if we are willing to follow Him. Today we pray particularly for vocations to the priesthood – for those who will become images of the Good Shepherd for us in our parishes. We pray for men who will be willing to look after the flock of God, not for their own gain, nor for their own convenience, but selflessly, with the love of the Master himself.

That is a tall order! That is why we need to pray for our priests, for those in formation for the priesthood, for those who are discerning a call to be a priest, those who are afraid to follow the call, those who have not yet heard the call which is already in their heart. Our prayer is essential!

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It is also important for us to actively encourage anyone who is showing the signs and the gifts that are needed for today's priests.

John Vianney, a saintly French Parish Priest who lived two hundred years ago, preached these words:

A good shepherd, a pastor after God's own heart, is the greatest treasure which the good Lord can grant a parish, and one of the most precious gifts of divine mercy.

The priest *is* a precious gift for the People of God. It is the priest who is the Lord's instrument in bringing about His Presence in the Eucharist. It is the priest who brings the Lord's loving mercy and forgiveness into the messes we make of our lives. It is the priest who helps us find purpose and meaning and direction in our lives as they guide us in God's teachings. It is the priest who cares for us as at all the special moments of our lives and who shares in all our joys and sorrows.

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In a few years' time the Diocese of East Anglia will be celebrating its fiftieth anniversary. I have been your Bishop for just nine of those years. As your Bishop I am concerned about the future of our Diocese. Those priests who now serve in our parishes have given up their whole lives in faithful service of God's people, many of them above and beyond the years expected of them. We are blessed with seven seminarians who are in formation for the priesthood, and with others who are actively discerning a vocation. As we pray for them and for all our priests, we also pray today that future generations of Catholics may continue to be served and loved and guided by true shepherds.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, we also remind ourselves of the women and men who serve the Church through their Religious Orders and Congregations. We have a contemplative community who offers its life in prayer and worship on behalf of the whole world. We also have

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active communities who lovingly serve God through a variety of gifts. Pray for them in thanksgiving and pray that they may continue to be blessed with vocations.

Finally, as St John Henry Newman reminds us, each of us has been called into being by God to carry out a specific service. Through our Baptism we are all members of the Body of Christ, whatever our state in life – and we are called to serve God and one another. That is our Baptismal vocation. We must pray for the ability to abandon our own plans, our own safe calculations and to learn to ask the Lord:

What are your plans, and calculations for me, what do you desire for me and my life?

We should be ready with a generous and open heart to respond to whatever God replies.

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May the Lord grant us more vocations both for the priesthood and the religious life. May he help us all to discover how we might strengthen the witness and the service of the Church in the world and in our service of one another.

May the Risen Christ continue to fill you with hope and peace!

With all good wishes and prayers,
Yours devotedly in Christ,

+ Alan

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