

**PASTORAL LETTER FROM BISHOP ALAN HOPES**  
**THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**  
**2015**

**To be read at every Mass in all the churches and oratories of the diocese the weekend of April 25/26**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, we have recently celebrated the Easter festival and are continuing through the holy season of Easter.

In the Lord's suffering, death and resurrection, we witness the great Christian mystery that teaches us that it is only through the Cross on Calvary, that true life in all its fullness can be attained.

As Jesus himself said in John's Gospel: *Unless the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains alone but if it dies it bears much fruit* (John 12:24).

Today, as we celebrate the 4th Sunday of the Easter season, we also celebrate what we call Good Shepherd Sunday and this is the day on which the Universal Church exhorts us to a world day of prayer for vocations.

In his message for today, Pope Francis reflects on the story of the Exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt.

This story, the Pontiff tells us, is a symbol of what it means to be called by God to serve in his Kingdom in a particular way, as a priest, a deacon or in religious life.

The people of Israel had to leave the comforts of the land in which they had lived and worked, in order to become a people, the new people that God wanted them to become.

God will also ask each of us in differing ways and at different times to leave the securities and certainties of life behind when he wants to bring us freedom and new life.

This weekend I am asking you all to pray in a particular way that more men from our diocese will have the courage to answer the call of the Lord to serve him as His priests.

I am also asking every single man of the Diocese to ask yourself the question whether God might be calling you to be a priest.

To become a priest requires that certain things have to be given up, and that certain responsibilities be taken on.

This can make us fearful.

That does not mean, however, that we are not being called!

The history of salvation is full of people who were fearful of what was being asked of them by God.

But through their saying Yes to him, God was able to bring about his plan for them and for his people.

I constantly wonder at and thank God for, having called me to serve him as a priest.

Yes, there have been moments of struggle and challenge.

But this is true of every vocation.

For me, above all else, the priesthood has been a continual source of joy and happiness, something that I have never regretted for one moment.

I know that I am not worthy of this vocation that God, in his amazing mercy, has entrusted to me.

But God chooses us knowing all of our strengths and weaknesses and then He works through us so that we, even in our weaknesses, may help Him build up his Kingdom.

And it is something which I would want you to consider when you are trying to work out what God's will is for your life.

The life of the priest is a life which mirrors the Good Shepherd whom we heard about in today's Gospel.

It is a life dedicated to helping God's people to share in the fullness of life that God wants us to enjoy.

The priest is called to *teach* the Word of God.

He must teach the people of God about Jesus Christ - Who he is, about his life, all that he has done for us, his life-giving teaching and that of his Church.

The priest is also called to *serve* God's people through his guidance and care of the community of the Church.

He is called to be an instrument of God's love and fatherly care for all of us.

The priest is called to *celebrate* the Mass, the greatest gift to the Church and function of the priesthood – to transform bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, so that the Lord's saving Sacrifice on the Cross can be offered each day for our good and for that of the whole world.

The priest is called to *reconcile* people to God and to each other.

He is given the authority to absolve sin in the sacrament of Confession: the task of being an instrument of God's mercy to his people is an awesome gift.

The Sacramental Priesthood, we must always remember is the Lord's gift to his Church.

It is absolutely vital for us, as we seek to live up to our Christian vocation to bring the message of salvation to the world.

And, if you are thinking that God is calling you to be a priest, I encourage you to speak to your own parish priest or to one of the Vocation Directors of the Diocese.

They will help you and reassure you.

Dear brothers and sisters, one last thing. We have four students in formation in the seminary for the priesthood. Last month five more were selected and will soon begin their formation. And still others are reflecting on their vocation.

This is wonderfully good news! It is a sign of great hope for the future of our Diocese! Please pray regularly that God will bless us with many more vocations.

The Diocese, however, will need to find £27,000 per year for each of our students, as this is what it costs to train, educate and to provide board and lodging in the seminary for them. We must, therefore, raise £234,000 this year alone. There will be a second collection at the end of this Mass. There are also envelopes available for you to take away with you and return over the next few weeks. Please be as generous as you can!

Thank you for all the encouragement and support you give to our priests, both in prayer and kind. I know that it is much appreciated by all who serve you in this way! Please pray for them, and pray for me, your chief shepherd!

Yours devotedly,

+Alan S Hopes

Bishop of East Anglia