

✠ Bosco MacDonald
Bishop of Clifton

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Grace and peace to you on this Fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday, when the Church asks us to pray in a particular way for vocations to the priesthood. We do so in the joy of the Resurrection, as the Church continues to rejoice in the victory of Christ over sin and death, and in the new life he brings to the world.

In today's Gospel, Jesus says that the sheep hear his voice, and that he calls his own by name and leads them out. These are tender and reassuring words, but they are also words that search us. The Lord does not call in vague or general terms. He calls personally. He knows us, loves us, and leads us. Every true vocation begins there, in the loving knowledge of Christ, the Good Shepherd, who calls each one by name.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we hear Saint Peter preaching with power, and those who listen are deeply moved. Saint Luke says that they were cut to the heart, which is a striking phrase. The call of God is not simply an idea to be admired or discussed. It reaches us inwardly. It disturbs us at times, awakens us, and draws a response from us. "What must we do?" the people ask. That question is still important; it lies at the heart of every vocation.

There are many voices in the modern world, and plenty of them promise happiness while leaving the heart unsatisfied. The voice of Jesus is different, for it neither confuses nor deceives, but calls with clarity and peace. Often it is heard and recognised only gradually, through prayer, through the witness of others, and through the circumstances of life. But it does carry an authority unlike any other. The Lord still calls, he still entrusts his Church to weak but willing human hands. He still opens the way into a life that is rich and fruitful. The joy of Easter reminds us that his call is an invitation into the fullness of life.

The priesthood is one of the great gifts Christ gives to his Church. Through the ministry of the priest, the Lord continues to teach, sanctify, forgive, and feed his people. He gathers the faithful around the altar, speaks his word, pours out his mercy, and stays close to his people in the turning points of life and in the quiet ordinary days in between. We need priests. Our parishes do. Our schools do. Our young people do. They need priests who are prayerful, joyful, faithful, and whose lives show that Christ is worth giving everything for.

A vocation to the priesthood rarely begins with complete clarity. More often it begins with something small but persistent: a quiet attraction, a restlessness that does not quite leave, a sense that the Lord may be asking something more, or a word of encouragement from someone who sees in us what we cannot yet see in ourselves. What matters is being willing to listen, and having the courage not to turn away.

So I encourage our priests to speak simply and openly about their own vocation. I hope that parents and grandparents will not be shy of encouraging generosity in the young. Our schools and chaplaincies too have an important part to play in creating an atmosphere in which the call of Christ can be heard and taken seriously. And I would say to our young people in particular: do not be afraid of the deeper question: *What are you asking of me, Lord?* Because it is a question that belongs in every Christian life.

Among those whom the Lord is calling, there will be some whom he is calling to the priesthood. And if that thought has ever crossed your heart, even quietly, do not brush it aside too quickly. Bring it to prayer. Speak to a priest you trust. Ask the Lord for light and for courage. He does not mislead us. He does not call in order to diminish us. He calls in order to give life.

Good Shepherd Sunday reminds us that vocations do not grow in isolation. They are nurtured within the life of the whole Church. A parish that prays, a family that lives the faith with joy, a school that takes Christ seriously, a chaplaincy that encourages generosity, all these help to make room for the voice of the Lord to be heard. Vocations tend to flourish where faith is lived with conviction and peace. They tend to struggle where discipleship becomes vague, hesitant, or routine. So today I ask every parish and every family in our diocese to join in prayer for vocations, to encourage them, and to trust that the Lord still provides shepherds for his people.

I know very well how much we need holy and generous priests for the future life of the Church. I also know that the Lord has not stopped calling. He is still at work in hearts. He is still raising up labourers for his harvest. Our part is to pray, to encourage, and to listen with faith, trusting always in the risen Christ, whose presence brings hope and joy to his Church.

May Mary, Mother of Priests, intercede for us. May Saint Joseph, faithful guardian and obedient servant, pray for those discerning the Lord's will. And may Christ the Good Shepherd bless our diocese with the vocations needed for the service of his people and the glory of his name.

With my prayers and best wishes,

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Bishop of Clifton

To be read and made available in all churches and chapels on the Fourth Sunday of Easter.