

Homily Notes.
Bishop Tom Deenihan.
Vocations Sunday 2021.

Today, the fourth Sunday of Easter, we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday. The reason is somewhat obvious, the readings of the Mass, as well as the prayers, concentrate on the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd.

A good shepherd cares for, leads and protects his flock. The image of Christ as such a shepherd is consoling for those of us who need care, need guidance, and need protection from time to time. Indeed, we all fall into those categories more often than we'd like to and more often than we might care to admit or imagine! Perhaps it is easier to imagine or acknowledge it these days!

The Gospel also uses the imagery of the Good Shepherd laying down his life for His flock. Sacrifice and generosity are central to the Christian calling and are integral to Priesthood. That imagery has been appropriate too in the context of the current pandemic where priests risked life and health to minister to the sick and dying and by administering the Sacraments to those in need. Their ministry was valued by those who experienced it in a dark and lonely time and reflects the care of the Good Shepherd.

That image of the Good Shepherd also causes today to be known as Vocations Sunday.

Unfortunately, it has become more difficult to preach on vocations and Vocations Sunday of late. Within the last few years, priesthood has become a less attractive option for young people and, indeed, is often viewed with

suspicion. Regrettably, Priesthood has also been portrayed as a somewhat less than serious pursuit on television and on print. It has also been commented that many parents would now not either wish or welcome a vocation to priesthood in one of their sons. In fact, we are told, many would actively discourage it. To be fair, much of the reason for that development rests largely with the dreadful betrayal perpetrated by some of our own number but I don't think that this is the full story.

And yet, today's readings put before us the image of a good shepherd. It is an ideal that Christ puts before all of us who wish to serve Him. It is an ideal that all of us in priesthood strive for. It is an ideal that none of us have reached though some are more successful than others. Despite the failings of some, the ideal is still there, the invitation remains and the need is, perhaps, even greater.

Despite the bad publicity, despite a growing secularism and despite the sins of some, the majority, the vast majority of us, are doing a job, a job that often goes unnoticed, a job that we are sometimes criticised for and a job that we are sometimes praised for. We do it because we want to do it, we do it because we feel God has called us to it, we do it to the best of our human ability and, it must be said, we are happy doing it. That latter aspect is seldom commented on, seldom noticed or seldom reported but important nevertheless. Most priests are happy in their vocation. Perhaps that is an aspect that does not get enough attention?

Correspondingly, society, by and large, wishes us to continue doing that job. Most people want to have their children baptised, most people want a sacramental and church marriage, most people want a church burial. Indeed, the absence and alteration of the traditional funeral rites in these days is what

is felt most by many. Faith has something to offer our society, our time and our contemporaries and it is welcomed!

But there is a disconnect somewhere in all this. If society wants priests, society must also encourage people to consider priesthood and, ultimately, to become priests. That is where there might appear to be a discrepancy or, even, a contradiction. That word 'encouragement' is important.

Despite the need, our age profile is increasing, and our numbers are falling.

Let me give you some figures.

There are currently 119 priests in this Diocese.

Of these, 19 are on loan from foreign dioceses or from religious congregations.

Of the remaining 100 incardinated priests of the diocese, 37 are over seventy and there are 21 of these men still serving in parishes who are over the age of 70 years.

The Diocese then has 63 priests of its own who are under 70 while there are 69 parishes in the Diocese.

Clearly, the shortage of priests will hit further very soon. Indeed, I am currently having discussions with priests about appointments for this year and it is becoming more difficult to fill all positions within the Diocese. There will be reductions this year and strategies to make do but, thankfully,

there will be some further priests coming into the diocese from abroad this year also.

Despite that, we are doing better than many other dioceses. But, given that we have 69 parishes and the fact that some parishes need more than one priest, you can see that this cannot continue for long. That is why Pastoral Development, Parish Councils and Faith Development initiatives as well as Vocation promotion will require much attention in the immediate future and will be an immediate priority for the Diocese when restrictions lift.

This has several immediate implications.

In practical terms, a few parishes in this diocese will be without a priest shortly, other parishes have already been linked with another neighbouring parish and more will be so linked this year. There has been a corresponding decline in the number of Masses in some parishes already and an increase in workload for those priests who remain working and are covering a greater area. The trend seems likely to continue but fewer priests will inevitably result in some reduction. That situation will affect all of us in years to come.

In saying this, one must also remember that the number of priests and seminarians worldwide is increasing, though the increase is not in Western Europe.

It is important also to acknowledge that this Diocese currently has three men at various stages of formation. One will be ordained a deacon this summer, another is studying in a Roman seminary and a third is on a pre-seminary programme to enter seminary in September. Of course, we need more. Encouragement again becomes important.

The Diocesan Vocations team launched a Vocations website this week, **meathvocations.com** and I appreciate their work in promoting vocations, do publicise that initiative. However, the Vocations Team will readily admit that they cannot do it alone. We must all encourage vocations.

There are, I believe, many people who still consider the idea of a vocation to religious life. In a sense, today's feast is directed towards them. The universal Church, this country, this diocese and this parish needs priests. The work remains and it is inconceivable that Christ has stopped calling people to serve Him in priesthood and religious life. If one accepts that premise, then one must conclude that people are no longer responding to the call for whatever reasons.

Perhaps the reputation of priesthood has become tarnished, perhaps society has become too materialistic, perhaps society is giving young people the impression that religion is outdated, priesthood and religious life is obsolete and financial success and social status is what counts. Maybe, maybe not. But I do believe that God is still calling.

If that is true, then we must all do what we can to encourage those that are being called.

There is an obligation on all of us to support and encourage those who may be considering a life as a priest, brother or sister. Perhaps, all things considered, all of us, laity, religious and clergy, by word, by deed and by example may not have been doing just that. In that sense, the reason for the decline in vocations may well rest nearer to home than we might like or care to imagine.