



To follow Jesus closely

A PASTORAL LETTER ON PRIESTHOOD AND VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT
DIOCESE OF DOWN AND CONNOR



The Rich Young Man

One of the most challenging Bible stories is that of the Rich Young Man.¹ The young man asks Jesus a question any of us would ask if given the chance to speak with him face-to-face: 'Good master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' The young man realises that eternity is a long time, and he longs to spend it with God. But how can he achieve this?

Jesus responds, 'You know the commandments,' and the young man protests that he has kept all of them since childhood.

Jesus looks at him with love; the kind of love which sees clearly into the heart to reveal its deepest secrets.²

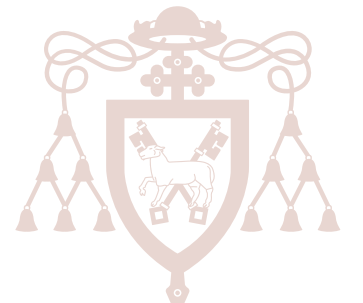
Then he utters those earth-shattering words: 'Go and sell everything you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'

In that moment, the young man realises that living the commandments is more demanding than he had first thought. He is unable, perhaps unwilling, to accept Jesus' challenge to dig deep and give more of himself. He goes away sad.

Those have to be among the most tragic words in all of the Bible: the young man 'went away sad.' He could have been a great disciple, but instead of trusting Jesus, he followed his own path.

¹ Mark 10: 17-31; Matthew 19: 16-30; Luke 18: 18-30.

² Hebrews 4:12.



Be your true self

Unhappiness caused by lack of fulfilment is becoming an all-too-common experience. People live increasingly in a state of permanent distraction, pulled one way or another by relentless demands. They risk becoming servants of the fleeting moment. For many, the most important thing in life is 'to do your own thing', 'to be true to yourself'.

However, we discover our true selves, and therefore happiness, not by doing what we want, but by following Jesus closely. And Jesus does not simply teach a way of life. He is the way, the truth and the life.³

The call to follow Jesus is the call to be your true self, fully human and alive to the world. No-one else has your sense of

humour. No-one else has your way of relating to people. God uses you, with your unique gifts and talents, as well as your shortcomings, to reach people in ways that no-one else can.

The great challenge, the real joy, of being a priest today is convincing people, especially young people, of this truth.

They need now, perhaps more than ever, spiritual guides who reassure them that life does make sense, that there is a God who loves them, and that in the end, all will be well.

The call to be a priest and to share with people this Good News needs to be heard with open minds and responded to with big hearts.



Men of communion

Speaking with parents, they sometimes share with me their reluctance to encourage their children to consider priesthood or religious life. They fear for them a life of isolation and loneliness.

Jesus did not call his disciples to follow him in order to isolate them from family and friends, but to welcome them into his new family.⁴ The word 'priest' reminds us that the individual priest is a member of the 'priesthood', the 'presbyterium'. He is called to live in communion with Jesus and his brother priests, and to foster this communion among God's people.

Communion flows from intimate friendship with Jesus, and is nourished daily by the Eucharist.⁵ Every time the priest celebrates Mass and speaks the words 'This is my

body, which will be given up for you', he is conscious that they are more than the language of ritual. Jesus wants to be experienced as a person, and so the priest must model these words in his daily life: 'Here is my body, my person, my life, which I give up with and in Jesus for you.'⁶

A spiritual life rooted in the Eucharist helps the priest to acquire the attitudes and sentiments of Jesus; to see people and judge events through the eyes of Jesus; to free his ways of thinking and acting from self-centredness and place them in the heart of Jesus. The priest in-touch with Jesus offers, by his own example, a way of life which is convincing, humanly and spiritually possible, and attractive.

³ Cf. John 14:6.

⁴ Cf. John 1:39-41.

⁵ At the Last Supper, Jesus calls his disciples 'friends' because he has made known to them everything that the Father has revealed to him. Cf. John 15:15.

⁶ In his Confessions, St Augustine refers to a vision he had about the meaning of Holy Communion in which Jesus said to him:

'You will not change me into yourself like bodily food; but you will be changed into me.' Confessions VII, 10, 18.

Priests and people together

A vocation to priesthood emerges from within, and is sustained by the wider faith community. It is a ‘particular gift’ which God provides for the good of the Church, to ‘help the people of God exercise faithfully and fully the common priesthood which it has received’ in baptism.⁷

This involves profound complementarity: ‘the more the laity’s own sense of vocation is deepened, the more that which is proper to the priest stands out.’⁸ A good priest forms authentic relationships⁹ and is committed to service and teamwork.¹⁰ He offers God’s people accompaniment as they discern the definite service to which they have each been called.

⁷ Saint John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 17.
⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, London (18 September, 2010).
⁹ A priest is called to know his people ‘by name’ as does any good shepherd. Cf. John 10:13.
¹⁰ Code of Canon Law, canon 529 § 2. The priest is to make every effort ‘to awaken and deepen co-responsibility in the one common mission of salvation, with a prompt and heartfelt esteem for all the charisma and tasks which the Spirit gives believers for the building up of the Church.’
¹¹ Roman Missal, Eucharistic Prayer II.
¹² Revelation 2:7. Charisms include teaching, catechesis, prayer, pastoral care, administration, music, writing, and so on.
¹³ Cf. Matthew 25: 31-46.
¹⁴ Cf. Saint John Paul II, *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, n. 27.

He fosters communion in the diversity of vocations to be found among the laity, be they husband or wife, father or mother, religious or single. He gathers each ‘into one by the Holy Spirit.’¹¹ He listens to what the Spirit is saying, calling forth and affirming the charisms and gifts of those he serves.¹²

In these ways, priests and people together build a community of faith which recognises and welcomes those who are suffering, the hungry and thirsty, strangers and the naked, those who are sick, imprisoned or unfairly treated in any way.¹³ They contribute to a just and fraternal society, a culture of life and a civilisation of love. They promote communion, peace and solidarity.¹⁴

Called to love and be loved

We are each blessed to know priests who are what they do and do what they are. They may not be the greatest public speakers, nor the most brilliant administrators, but they live lives of love and speak a language of love. Their hearts belong to Jesus and people instinctively recognise this; their faith is contagious.

For some, the responsibilities of priesthood weigh heavily, and can at times overwhelm. Stress and exhaustion take their toll. In the course of life, priests are wounded by failure and sin and stand in need of healing. When they experience difficulties, priests should feel they can ask for and receive the support they need.



The man who allows himself to be touched, comforted and sustained by God’s saving love comes to realise that in spite of human frailty, Jesus remains close to him and walks with him always.

Yes, it is a challenging time to be a priest, but it is an equally challenging time to remain close to Jesus in every walk of life. Priests share highs and lows with their parish family, and are privileged to be involved in the most personal, moving and significant milestones of life. Therefore priests are not to be pitied. On the contrary, they are to be loved, supported, encouraged, and if needs be, challenged.

To be a priest is always ‘something beautiful, capable of fulfilling life with new splendour and profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties.’¹⁵

¹⁵ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 167.

Promoting a culture of vocational discernment

It has been my experience that the people of this diocese are committed to service and mission. They are passionate, 'can-do' Catholics who really want the Church to be what she is meant to be. Our parish ministries, Catholic schools and diocesan bodies function only thanks to generous and willing volunteers.

They have a genuine love for their priests and a readiness to support them through thick and thin. Whilst there are fewer priests and religious and a decline in the numbers presenting to study for ministry, we are confident that Jesus continues to call men and women to follow him closely.

At the recent Synod on Youth, Pope Francis encouraged us to support young people as they listen, discern and live Jesus' call.¹⁶ For them to hear this call, and to respond to it generously, a love for priesthood and religious life must be nurtured in the home, within all our faithful families.

Are you helping young people to hear Jesus' call? Are you helping them discern the gifts the Holy Spirit has given them for mission and service? Are you praying for them, encouraging them, supporting them? Are you open to the possibility that someone from your family or circle of friends is being called to priesthood or religious life? Will you affirm them in that call?



To build a culture of vocational discernment, we must speak positively of vocation in our homes, as well as our places of work, study and recreation. We must share with our loved ones stories of how priests and religious have helped us grow in our relationship with Jesus and each other.

Above all, we must encourage them by our own Christian witness. Parents who are outward-looking and missionary, and who are actively involved in parish life, will inspire their children to follow Jesus closely and respond to his call generously.

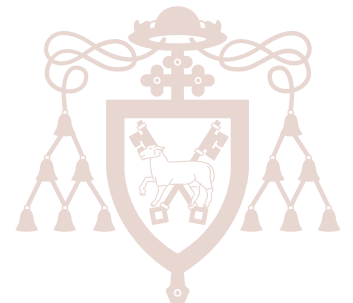
For its part, the diocese has established a Vocations Working Group to develop an accompaniment programme

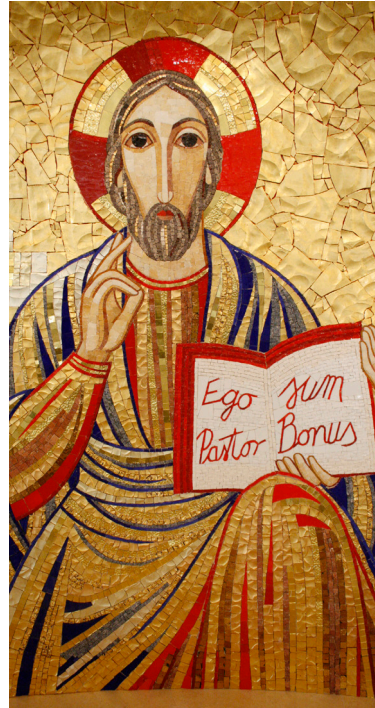
for men considering priesthood.¹⁷ It provides regular opportunities for prayer, reflection and mutual support. Men are assigned a priest-mentor and the services of a spiritual director. It is hoped these supports will assist them in their vocational discernment as they continue with work or study, so as to better prepare them to make the decision to enter seminary.

This programme complements similar supports provided by religious orders and congregations for men and women considering a vocation to religious life.

¹⁶ See further the Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment (2018). See also, Pastoral Guidelines for Fostering Vocations to Priestly Ministry (2012), Congregation for Catholic Education.

¹⁷ Cf. Saint John Paul II, Pastores Dabo Vobis, n. 64; Congregation for Clergy, The Gift of the Priestly Vocation (2016).





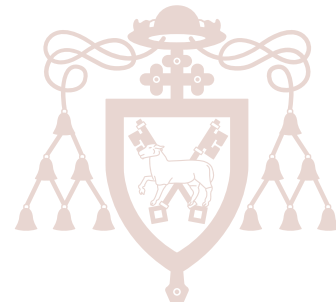
Good Shepherd Sunday

Good Shepherd Sunday falls on 12th May, a day when we pray for an increase in vocations to priesthood and religious life. I ask that the priests, deacons and people of each parish and pastoral community prepare for this feast by keeping vigils of prayer on Thursday 2nd May.

After these vigils, a nine-day novena for vocations will begin across the diocese. The novena can be prayed individually or as a family, allowing our homes to become powerhouses of prayer and vocational discernment. This is to be a joyful celebration of thanksgiving for the gift of priesthood and religious life.

I ask too that each school makes a special effort to pray for an increase in vocations. Assemblies and class prayer time should be dedicated to this. Schools, together with their chaplaincy teams, should explore creative ways for integrating time and space within the school-day for vocational discernment.

I ask that every priest in the diocese visits their local school(s) to share with young people their vocation story and to encourage them to consider that Jesus may be calling them to follow him closely as priests or religious.



A lifetime's adventure

To all those, of whatever age, who feel that Jesus may be calling them to follow him closely as priests or religious, I ask you to listen, be open-minded and big-hearted. Talk to those you trust and know you well; attend a vocations weekend; make space and time to speak with Jesus heart-to-heart.

Be brave, dig deep and give more of yourself. To say 'yes' to Jesus, to follow him closely, is a lifetime's adventure which leads all the way to heaven.

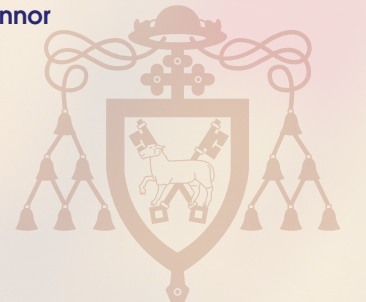
Remember that the rich young man went away sad because he couldn't find it within himself to say 'yes'. I sometimes wonder if, in the end, he found happiness. I hope he did. But the question for the one who chooses to follow their own path rather than go the way of Jesus, is not 'can I be happy?' but 'will I be happier?'

Jesus calls each of us to follow him in particular ways, based on who we are and who we are supposed to be. He knows us better than we know ourselves, a great reason to trust him. I thank Jesus every day for calling me to follow him closely as a priest, and for giving me the strength I need to trust him.

It is my prayer, and I know yours too, that everyone will follow Jesus closely, and that more will do so as priests and religious.

+ Noel Treacy

Bishop of Down and Connor



The Diocese of
Down and Connor

www.downandconnor.org
www.vocationsdownandconnor.org

