



**Pastoral Letter from Rt Rev Robert Byrne CO
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle**

To be read in all churches and chapels in the Diocese
on 21st/22nd September 2019

My dear brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ,

It is now six months since my Installation as your bishop and I would like to thank the clergy, religious and faithful of the diocese for the support and friendship I have received since then. It a huge privilege to be bishop of such a great diocese. The last months have been a busy time getting to know the people and places and now I have almost completed the Visitation of our eighteen Partnerships. I have been welcomed most warmly in each of them and greatly impressed by the deep faith and vibrant witness of so many of our priests, deacons, religious and lay faithful.

However, it has struck me in the last months that there is much work to be done. We need to build on the hard work and initiatives of the past and face the future together in continuing to increase and strengthen the Church in the North East. In today's gospel our Lord is teaching us that to be his disciple demands that we put all our trust in him. We cannot serve two masters. Our vocation as baptized Christians is to serve Christ alone and proclaim his gospel to the world. Christ came to save all people and our mission is to demonstrate his saving love not only by what we say but also by the living witness of what we do. We have the confidence to proclaim the gospel in all circumstances and reach out to those who are in any way poor and marginalised. Pope Francis is constantly reminding us that our parish communities must be "centres of constant missionary outreach". This is a challenge we should all be prepared to take up.

Of course, we cannot proclaim Christ until we know him and have experienced his personal love for each of us in our own lives. It is principally through prayer that we can do this. Through prayer we grow in a living friendship with Christ through faith. It is also by our sacramental encounters with him, especially in the Holy Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation that we come face to face with his merciful love. This love has the power to change our lives. The Lord has given us through the Church the grace to transform us into the people he wants us to be. It is only then that we will find the happiness and peace that only God can give.

I strongly believe that our diocese is able to look to the future with confidence and with faith and hope. This process has already begun with the 'Forward in Hope' initiative. In the coming months I will be talking to the clergy and faithful of the diocese as to how best we can become a stronger community of faith reaching out to everyone in our region. We will be looking at how some of the structures of the diocese can be developed in order to assist our mission and how we can become more engaged in taking the faith to those who do not know Christ. Our starting point will be the person of Jesus Christ; the Way the Truth and the Life and the centre and foundation of all that we are and do.

This autumn there are three events in the life of the Church which will help us to deepen and develop our common calling to holiness. The first is an international celebration. On 13th October the Holy Father will canonise Blessed John Henry Newman in Rome. Saint John Henry will be very much a saint of our time. He will be the first Englishman, not a martyr, to be canonized for many centuries. His long life stretched through most of the nineteenth century. Born in London in 1801 and a Fellow of Oriel College Oxford Newman was a man of great intellectual ability and his search for the truth led him to make sacrifices he never envisaged and took him to places he did not want to go. This search for truth led him into full communion with the Catholic Church in 1845. He then moved to Birmingham as an Oratorian priest until his death in 1890. St John Henry Newman teaches us that to sacrifice our life for Christ leads us “from shadows and images into the truth.” His countless letters and books explain to our increasingly sceptical world that Christ is at the centre and the “fountain-head from which all good henceforth might flow.” Newman is a true prophet for our age.

There is also a national initiative called “The God who Speaks” which is promoted by the bishops of England and Wales. The bishops are calling on every Catholic in our countries to deepen our relation with Christ through the scriptures. It was the great biblical scholar, St Jerome, who said that “ignorance of the scriptures is ignorance of Christ”. The scriptures are a deep well which never runs dry; if we take time to engage with the word of the Lord prayerfully then it will refresh and energise us in God’s service. I am grateful to Fr Christopher Jackson and his team for putting together a programme for the coming year which can awaken and deepen our love of the Bible. The official start will be the 1st Sunday of Advent and details will be available on the diocesan website.

Thirdly, there will be an important Marian event from 24-26th October when the statue of our Lady of Walsingham will be visiting our Cathedral. This is a part of the Dowry Tour in which the statue will visit all the Catholic Cathedrals in England in preparation for the dedication of England to our Lady of Walsingham in March next year. England was called the Dowry of Mary before the Reformation and is a reminder to us of how Mary the Mother of God constantly leads us to a deeper love of her Son. Mary, the first member of the Church is a continual example of perfect discipleship and a powerful intercessor in heaven.

I am grateful to Fr John Butters for coordinating the visit and full details will be published soon. Please make a note of the dates and bring a parish group if you are able. As we prepare to step into a new decade of the 21st century let us do so full of hope and confidence. As we see in the lives of people like John Henry Newman God constantly raises up great men and women who help us on our way. We also help one another as a diocesan family to move in to the future in the “joy of the gospel.”

Yours devotedly in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read '+ Robert Byrne CO.'

✠ Rt Rev Robert Byrne CO
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle