

DIOCESE OF HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE



*✠ Rt Rev Séamus Cunningham
Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle*



PASTORAL LETTER - CLERGY TRAINING FUND 2013

My dear people

Today's parable is another familiar story whose theme – pride versus humility – we can all relate to in some way. Two men went up to the Temple to pray. They both sought God, who had already seen them though they did not notice. The Pharisee had his ego; the tax collector left it all behind. One man encountered God, the other did not. The Pharisee is praying, but who is he praying to? Himself! He is praising himself, while at the same time looking down on others. He fails to see how he has fallen short. We can all at times see ourselves in this Pharisee – we can all have this tendency to think better of ourselves and worse of others. The prayer of the tax collector is much shorter than that of the Pharisee. He recognises his weakness and sinfulness. He recognises himself for who he is and he simply calls out to the God who is full of mercy, compassion and love. He trusts in God and not in himself. We too must recognise the good in our lives but also recognise the need to come before the Lord in our sinfulness and pray, like the tax collector for mercy and a renewal in God's love. The prayer of the Pharisee is a prayer of thanksgiving but the focus is on his own goodness. Any true prayer of thanksgiving should first of all focus on the goodness of God.

We give thanks today for the many blessings God has given to each one of us and for the gifts he has bestowed upon us. We thank God for our families and also for our parish communities which are our families of faith. We thank God for the gift of faith which is to be treasured and shared. Let us recommit ourselves to Pope Francis' constant call for us to be humble and compassionate in the Lord's service and to serve each other as best we can.

We thank God too, today for the gift of the priesthood and for all who serve as ordained ministers in our Diocese. I ask you all today to pray for them and to support and affirm them in their ministry. I ask you to pray too that more men will respond to the call of God to serve him and his people in the ordained ministry. Pope Francis met with the priests of his Diocese in the middle of September and through them speaks to all of us called to serve as ordained ministers. He reminds us that "a priest belongs to the people of God" and asks us never to lose our identity which is in communion with the Holy Spirit, because without the Holy Spirit "we are in danger of losing our way in the understanding of faith", and run the risk of ending up disoriented and self-referenced. This is precisely what happened to the Pharisee in today's Gospel. Pope Francis calls us as bishops, priests and deacons to be true pastors and zealous missionaries who live in constant yearning to go in search of the lost, never settling for simple administration. He called on his fellow priests never to be too lax or too severe, but to be merciful, taking care of the sinner and accompanying them on the journey of reconciliation. He reminds us that priests are themselves "plucked from the flock" and challenges us to defend ourselves from "the rust of spiritual worldliness" which threatens the very nature of a shepherd. He concluded by telling his brother priests to be loving disciples of the Good Shepherd, guarding their own precious and fragile flocks with tenderness, and never forgetting that special "preferential option" for the poor.

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We have been blessed this year with the ordination of a new priest, Fr Dan Fitzpatrick, for our Diocese and the ordination of three new deacons, one permanent and two still in formation. We have two seminarians in formation at the Beda College in Rome one of whom will be ordained a deacon next summer and the other a priest. We have one in the English College in Rome, two in St Mary's College, Oscott, one of whom will also be ordained priest and a new seminarian beginning studies in the English College in Valladolid in Spain. We have ten men in formation for the permanent diaconate, four of whom will be ordained next summer. Please keep all those in formation in your prayers. We owe a debt of gratitude to all those who help to teach and form our future priests and deacons. The monthly discernment meetings continue each month in St Mary's Cathedral in Newcastle with a steady number of people appreciating the opportunity to gather for a time of prayer and reflection.

I ask you please to be as generous as you can on the occasion of our annual collection to support those in formation to become priests and deacons. Training becomes increasingly more expensive each year. The costs for the on-going formation of our clergy which is so important in these changing times is also met from this fund.

With every good wish and prayer

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