

DIOCESE OF HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE



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



October 2009

My dear people

As you know, Pope Benedict asks us to see this year as 'The Year of the Priest'. He initiated this year on the Feast of St John Vianney, in August this year. We celebrate the 150th anniversary of St John Vianney, who was a totally dedicated parish priest and is seen as the 'patron saint of parish priests worldwide'. He was a priest for his time. He knew his parishioners, was a man of deep prayer and committed to those who came to see him.

Today we are blessed with priests who are men of our time, and in future the needs of the Church will be served by priests who will continue to help our local parish communities to 'ensure that the needs of people are met, that the truth is spoken and that God is worshipped' – in the words of our Diocesan Vision Statement.

We live in a very different world from that of St John Vianney. But his commitment is an inspiration for us. In our time we need priests who are men of prayer and in love with the Gospel; men who can help our parish communities cope with change; men who are flexible and adaptable, close to their parishioners and willing to reflect on the issues of today in the light of the Gospel of Jesus.

Our diocesan priests continue to bring our worshipping communities together, to encourage care and support of the vulnerable, the formation of our young people, to preach the Gospel and to lead people in prayer. It is a real privilege to serve people and to encourage them to serve each other. Our ministry is also a fundamental source of support and encouragement to us as priests, the love and friendship of others makes real in our lives the love God has for each of us.

Almost 20 years ago, the then Cardinal Ratzinger made a speech to those preparing for a meeting in Rome about the Ministry and Life of priests. In his speech he said:

The essential function of priests is this...to keep the people aware of its priestly character and labour that it may live as such and glorify God by its whole existence...¹

¹ L'Osservatore Romano No 44 (1163) 29 October 1990 pp 6-7.

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In his speech the present Pope explores how our priests are to affirm and encourage the gifts and charisms of all those who are baptised so that, together, we witness to the person of Jesus Christ in our world today.

So this weekend I ask you to pray especially for the priests who minister in our Church – those in parishes, chaplaincies, seminaries, the forces and other areas of Church life.

I also ask you to pray that men will be called by God and respond to the call to look towards becoming a priest. We have two priests who will help those wondering about becoming priests: Fr Andrew Downie is our Diocesan Vocations Director and Fr Michael McCoy is Promoter of Vocations.

At the present moment we have 7 men in formation in Ushaw, Valladolid and the Beda in Rome. This year I had the privilege of ordaining David Smith, Thomas McHale and Lee Barrett to the Priesthood. Please remember them as they begin their ministry as priests in Hexham and Newcastle. We owe a debt of thanks to all those who help to teach and form our future priests.

I fully appreciate that we have all been affected by the worldwide economic downturn of the last year – but I hope you don't mind if I ask you to be as generous as you can on the occasion of our annual collection to support those in formation to become Diocesan priests.

With every good wish

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