

4th Sunday of Eastertide (A)

26th April 2026

'Called to be a Shepherd'

Acts 2: *God has made Him both Lord and Christ.* Ps 22: He guides me along the right path ... 1Pt 2: *you have returned to the Shepherd of your souls.*

Jn 10: *if anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go ... and find pasture*

Some of you know Aylesford, the shrine of Our Lady of Mount Carmel & St Simon Stock, a Carmelite friary in Kent. It's a tranquil spot, nestling by the River Medway, and a place I love to go to for a quiet day of prayer, and to take groups to for day retreats or weekends. Indeed some of you have come with me there over the years. For me, it also has a deeper meaning, because in many ways I see it as the *home of my vocation* as a priest. When I was little, we lived very near there, just 2 miles away. And one of the things we did on a Sunday afternoon — if we didn't go out walking on the N. Downs — was to go to Aylesford, to the shrine. Come rain or shine, we would go to Aylesford ... sometimes it was bustling with pilgrims, sometimes we had the place almost to ourselves ... but always, as a young family, it was a special place to go for my parents, my sister and brother, and me. And of all the lovely precincts of the Friars, the place that for

many visitors is the heart of the shrine is the *Cloister Chapel*, a small, rather dimly lit chapel, solid stone walls, deeply tranquil, and with that nostalgic smell of the oil of the burning candles: it always felt a truly holy place. Somewhere, somehow, deep in the place in one's heart where only the Spirit works, this place — I am convinced — helped me to come to know that I ought to be a priest. By the time we left Kent, when I was just ten, I already knew that I should be a priest. Despite the 17 years from that time to the day I entered seminary, I never knew any other real calling than that of wanting to be a priest.

We celebrate today the Mass of the 4th Sunday of Eastertide, which is always kept as 'Good Shepherd Sunday' (using some excerpt of Jn 10), and as *Vocations Sunday*. The image of the Good Shepherd is a powerful one, isn't it, and endearing one? For most Jewish people of Jesus's day, close to the land and to farming and to the rearing of animals, the image had a direct appeal. At times in the past, Abraham, Moses and King David had all been shepherds. The most famous of all the psalms of Israel is

the one we had today, invoking “The Lord as my Shepherd.” Christian saints, too, have been shepherds! — think of St Patrick, St Cuthbert, St Joan of Arc, St John of God, Pope St Pius V, or St Bernadette! No wonder Jesus used the image of Himself. And if the Son of God wanted to be seen as a tender and loving shepherd, by the same token so too do the bishops of the Church (which is why they carry a pastoral staff, or crozier), and likewise the priests who assist their bishop in his shepherding.

At first hearing, there seem to be mixed metaphors in the Gospel today: “*I am the Good Shepherd*” ... and also “*I am the door of the sheep.*” But the point is that a shepherd at that time would also act as the gate of the sheepfold: he would *lie down in the gateway* to be the guardian of the flock. (Jesus says later in this same chapter, Jn 10: “*I lay down My life for My sheep ...*”) As the gate *and* the Shepherd, he gathers His flock into the fold of the Church, and He protects us in here; and then He takes us out again to pasture, evangelizing and on mission: He knows the right paths and the good and safe places; he knows the

pastures that will be rich and green, and will give life to His flock. The Shepherd lives His life so closely with His flock, He is always there for us ... and He literally “*lays down His life for His flock.*”

Jesus has, from the very beginning, also shared that duty of shepherding His people: He called the Twelve apostles, and they called others inspired by the Spirit, to continue His work. To be called to the priesthood is to accept that work, a work that is not one’s own, but is a particular sharing in the work of the Lord: a caring for the flock of Christ. First of all, like the “coming in,” it means caring for you, the people, *here* in the fold, in the Church, at prayer, ‘at rest,’ reviving you with the sacraments of Jesus’s love and forgiveness. This is a sacred and unique duty, by which Christ gives His life to His people. And then, like the “going out,” it also means helping you take your Catholic faith out into the street, back into your home & family, and into the university: translating the faith into action, encouraging you to be courageous in your following of Jesus by wholly living up to His teachings.

We need vocations, without question; but to have vocations to the priesthood *we first need holy families* who prize the faith above all other things. If our Catholic community lives and believes in the Lord fully, then young people will not want a lifestyle of riches, luxuries, and pleasure, but a life of rich service to God: the sharing of shepherding the precious people that Christ has won to Himself, His Church. The key question, is, *are we in our families — and in our Chaplaincy — allowing God’s voice to be heard* by the young people whom God may wish to call to special service and commitment? Of course, the vocation to marriage and family life, to bringing up children devoutly in the faith is always the more numerous calling; and it is a vital one, because devout families lead to a vibrant, prayerful Catholic life in parishes. And young adults in families that are praying and attending Mass consistently are going to be more attuned to the call of God in their lives. Each and every family should want for their children only what God’s plan is, for them. For some, that plan will be the joy and offering of a life as a priest, a

sister, a friar or monk. If that is truly your calling — if that is what God is calling you to — *it must never be discounted*, it must never be discouraged; you need joyfully to make a prayerful and truthful discernment. Give yourself the space, the confidence, the support, to determine if that is truly the life to which God is calling you. Each and every diocese has its ‘vocations director’ — often a priest, who helps those young people in the diocese who are considering a vocation to the priesthood or religious life. We had Fr Roger Taylor here just a few weeks ago, who has that important role in our own diocese of Westminster. He, along with the parish priest, or your university chaplain, is the usual person to turn to in the first instance to, to assist in the sacred process of discernment.

To foster vocations to the priesthood and religious life is not just his task, however, but *is the job of us all*. We must, as Catholics together, generate a climate that is *positive* about vocations. Our families, our parishes, our University Chaplaincy — if we are true to our faith in

Jesus the Good Shepherd — must *want the Lord to provide shepherds* for His people, to provide “labourers for His harvest.” In the way we speak, in the way we behave, in the way to pray, let’s be certain to help each other — young Catholics — always to hear the calling to the life Jesus wants for us. “*I have come so that they may have life; and have it to the full*”!

Archbishop Richard, the new Archbishop of Westminster, has written to every priest and parish this week, to ask us as a diocesan family to pray fervently for vocations. I quote some of his words as he urges us to take ‘Vocations Sunday’ seriously:

Priestly ministry flows, in a very particular way, from the celebration of the Eucharist. ... From this celebration flows his ministry of servant-leadership for all those entrusted to his care — in whatever circumstance he may carry this out.

The discernment of this vocation, as Pope Leo reminds us, calls for “a relationship based on prayer and silence.” Such prayer and silence require a commitment of time, but this is time that will bear great fruit. It is important for us all ... to foster time for such prayer and support those

whom the Lord calls to share in His priesthood.

The practice of *Eucharistic Adoration* ... provide[s] excellent opportunities for prayer for priestly vocations and I ask every [community] to hold a Holy Hour each week over the next month for this intention.

The praying of the *Rosary* is a part of many people’s lives of prayer ... commit to praying the Rosary for vocations to priesthood, whether this be together or alone ...

The call to priesthood, more often than not, comes in quiet ways: the example of a *priest*; the example of *parents and family members* as they persevere in faith; a thought about *service to the Church*; a renewed experience of *God’s presence* when on retreat or at a *day of prayer* and celebration; a reawakening of awareness of the *Real Presence* of Christ in the Eucharist. Above all, the call to priesthood comes through the *gentle promptings of the Holy Spirit*.

To those of you who sense these stirrings of the Holy Spirit, calling you to service of Christ and his Church, “pause, listen, entrust yourselves. In this way, the gift of your vocation will mature, bringing you happiness and yielding abundant fruit for the Church and the world.”