From the office of the Bishop of Plymouth

PASTORAL LETTER FOR 19TH JULY 2026
16TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Forty years ago today I was ordained a priest. I'm not the only Jubilarian in the Diocese this year: Fr Anthony O'Gorman is a Silver Jubilarian; Canon John Webb a Ruby Jubilarian like me; and Fr Gerard Wilberforce a Golden Jubilarian. I'm sure each one of them joins with me in giving deep thanks for the gift of priesthood. I find the priests of this Diocese to be a wonderful group of men. I admire them deeply for their dedication and steadfast service. I include in their number not only the priests of Plymouth Diocese but the many other priests - religious and of other dioceses, especially the Diocese of Orlu - who contribute so generously to the Diocese's mission. And we need more of them. We rejoice to have five good men in seminary. But we need more. As I go around the Diocese, I find myself often recalling Jesus's words, that "the harvest is rich but the labourers are few."

These words – that "the harvest is rich but the labourers are few" - find a deep echo in the story Jesus tells us today about the man who went out to sow. They should cause each one of us to ask, "What more can I do to sow the seed of priesthood in the hearts of young men in my parish?" Communities are the seedbed of vocations – parish communities, school communities, religious communities, university chaplaincies. Each one of your priests will be here because something or someone sowed in his heart the idea of priesthood and he received the grace to respond. Ask him and he's very likely to tell you it was a particular priest who inspired him. I thank the priests who serve in this Diocese for saying 'yes' to Jesus's call to follow him in this extraordinary ministry. And to each of them I would say, "You have a particular responsibility to ask of any young men in your care whom you think might have a calling whether they had ever considered the priesthood."

I've found diocesan priesthood to be an even more wonderful life than I would ever have imagined. Yes, there are crosses – but that's true of all discipleship. There are also many consolations – not least the marvellous variety of people whom you meet and accompany through life. I'm touched to hear so many priests say how much they receive from prison ministry, for instance. I was talking about this with a group of experienced pastors. "It's because," said one, "we meet Christ in the prisoners." "And hopefully they meet Christ in us," suggested another. "The same is true of hospitals," chimed in another. "All the people we've met as they embark, often very frightened, on long journeys through illness to sickness or death; and their families as well – whom we often accompany for years afterwards." "We remember so many of their names," observed another. "We hold them in our hearts." For priests, the words of the psalmist ring very true, when the psalmist says of the Lord, "He has put into my heart a marvellous love for the faithful who dwell in his land."

We hold in our hearts so many of the faithful we encounter in parish and school and chaplaincy – not only those we meet in prison (though it's deeply moving when you do meet a parishioner in prison) or hospital or school but the countless others whom we baptised, whom we reconciled with God in the sacrament of penance; all those with whom we celebrated the sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood; the many couples who exchanged their 'yes' before us. And the housebound – so many precious, housebound people to whom we brought the Body of Christ for years: so many of their names we shall hold in our hearts forever. And then there are all those people who asked that we pray for them. Like so many priests, I bring to the Cross every morning the prayers of those who've asked me to pray for them: I ask the Lord to hold them in his Sacred Heart.

Of course, at the core of every priest's life is the celebration of the Mass. St Mother Theresa used to tell priests they should celebrate every Mass as if it were the first Mass of their lives. I've often seen those words reproduced on the walls of a sacristy. They capture something of the renewal which many a priest will tell you he feels as he celebrates Mass each day – the way it renews that first call to priesthood, as do so many of the encounters he has with people in the course of his day.

I heard an elderly priest of this Diocese say recently, "It's been such a wonderful life that I wish I could have it all again!" To any young man who hears this and feels he may be called to be a priest, I would say, "Come and see" – the words Jesus spoke to the first disciples when they asked him where he lived. I would add, "You know where he lives – in the churches of your locality, in the Most Blessed Sacrament. Go, be still before him and ask, 'Is it possible you may be calling me to be a priest too?'"

And to you parishioners, I would say, "Do ask yourselves if you know of a young man in whom you see a potential priest – and, if so, ask him; sow the seed." Call forth from within him the charism with which he, like all of us, was endowed at his Baptism. There is a multiplicity of gifts, as St Paul reminds us, of charisms with which all the faithful have been endowed. There will be other occasions to speak of the wealth of other vocations just as important - to married life, single life, consecrated virginity, religious life, diaconate. But it feels right today, in the context of celebrating Priestly Jubilee, to focus on priesthood.

If you are a young man who hears this and feels encouraged to consider a priestly vocation, I would urge you to go and speak to a priest about it. Meanwhile let us all resolve daily to "pray the Lord of the harvest to send labourers into his harvest" – and trust the Lord may surprise us!

Yours sincerely in Christ

+Nicholas

Bishop of Plymouth