



**Pastoral letter to be read at all Masses on the  
30<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time  
24<sup>th</sup>/25<sup>th</sup> October 2009**

My dear friends,

On the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in June this year, Pope Benedict inaugurated the Year of the Priest. This is a very timely initiative by the Holy Father as it calls everyone, priests and people alike, to look once again at what priesthood means for the Church.

The example which Pope Benedict sets before us is that of St John Mary Vianney, known as the Curé of Ars. Despite many pastoral and personal spiritual trials he would often say, ‘The priesthood is the love of the heart of Jesus’. This touching expression makes us reflect, first of all, with heartfelt gratitude on the immense gift which priests represent, not only for the Church, but also for humanity itself. I think of all our priests in the Diocese of Nottingham who quietly present Christ’s words and actions each day to you and to the whole world, striving to be one with the Lord in their thoughts and their will, their sentiments and their style of life. I often say how proud I am of our priests who even amid difficulties remain faithful to their vocation as “friends of Christ”, whom he has called by name, chosen and sent? It is very easy for us to concentrate on the difficulties that are affecting the priesthood and not see priesthood for what it is. Therefore I would like to address some of these matters to remove any confusion that may surround them.

No one, least of all Pope Benedict, is trying to ignore problems which afflict the priesthood. On the contrary, priests live with these and other issues before their eyes everyday of their lives. Foremost amongst these in recent year has been the sexual abuse by some priests of children. Much has been done in recent years to make our churches and institutions into safe places for children and vulnerable adults. Yet we still live with the shame that some unfaithful priests have brought upon us. Disclosure of appalling practices by priests in our own country and abroad cause priests to reflect deeply on the exercise of their ministry. Voices both inside and outside the church continue to call for a quick-fix solution such as the ordination of married men. But, it is a sad fact that other Christian communities with married ministers also suffer from sexual scandals.

I have often heard it said that one way to combat the shortage of vocations would be to ordain women, although there is no evidence from other Christian communities to suggest that this is the case. Therefore, I think it is worth restating why the Church can only ordain men. The reason is a simple one even though it may seem to be against modern, and often laudable, principles of equality between the sexes. It is that the Church is bound to follow the example of Christ himself who chose only men as apostles. Some light on this obligation can be shed if we consider another sacrament, the Eucharist. In the Mass the Church follows the words of Christ himself when the bread and wine are consecrated; it has not made up these words, neither does the Church consider that it has the authority to make such a change. In a similar way only men are ordained in the Church because to ordain women would be to devise something that Christ did not institute. No, I believe that the answer to the answer to modern day issues affecting priesthood can only be found by deepening our relationship with Christ so that we can understand more fully the priesthood that he instituted for his Church. Only a spiritual renewal by priest and people which will reveal eternal values of the priesthood will equip the Church to face up to and overcome contemporary issues.

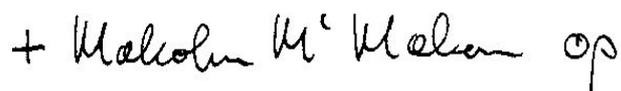
Another aspect of priesthood that is often challenged is that of mandatory celibacy for our priests. Yet the celibate priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church has always been understood as a special gift that we should treasure. In our tradition, celibacy is not a mere external rule but a spiritual necessity. That is why celibacy has become the normal expression of priesthood for us. I know that from time to time the Pope will make an exception for genuine pastoral reasons but this does not alter the rule. If celibacy is considered as a gift within the mystery of the priesthood then the priest himself is seen as an icon of Christ who 'emptied himself taking the form of servant' (Philippians 2). Being a servant of Christ and the Church as a priest is something more than holding a holy public office exercised on behalf of the community. The Second Vatican Council made it clear that through ordination and by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, priests are signed with a special character and so are configured to Christ the priest. (cf. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 2) In other words, the mission and life of the priest are so shaped to Christ's mission and life that the priest acts in the name of Christ himself the head of the Church, and shares in the work by which Christ builds up, makes holy and guides the Church. It follows therefore that someone who is configured to Christ by ordination should also be spiritually likened to him through celibacy.

I know that you, God's faithful people, think highly of our priests. I know that you value your priests not simply because of what they do for you or because they are good men. You understand that, in following their vocation and living out their priesthood, priests are making Christ present to you in Word and Sacrament: nourishing you spiritually through the Mass and Holy Communion, and offering forgiveness and reconciliation in the Sacrament of Penance and the Sacrament of the Sick.

This pastoral letter gives me the opportunity to thank you for the many practical ways in which you support your priests. I am not referring to the way in which you participate in your parish life, which is your responsibility because of your baptismal vocation. No, what I mean are the many ways in which you show them kindness, offer them friendship and give them respect. I know how much these things matter greatly to them. I am also sure that you remember them in your prayers but there are two ways in this Year of the Priest that I would like you to give extra spiritual support to your priests.

- Please include the prayer for priests, which is on the prayer card that will be given out today, in your daily prayers.
- Try to attend the Chrism Mass at Nottingham Cathedral on Wednesday, 31 March 2010. At this Mass where the Sacred Oils are blessed and the Holy Chrism consecrated in preparation for the Easter ceremonies, the priests of the diocese renew the vows that they made at their ordination.

Wishing you every blessing,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Malcolm M<sup>c</sup>Mahon OP". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning and a small circle at the end.

**Rt Rev Malcolm McMahon OP**  
**Bishop of Nottingham**

*Bishop's House*  
*NOTTINGHAM*  
*October 2009*