



**PASTORAL LETTER
OF THE
MOST REVEREND BERNARD LONGLEY
ARCHBISHOP OF BIRMINGHAM
FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, 29/30 APRIL 2023**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I am the gate. Anyone who enters through me will be safe.

We are about halfway through the Easter season, still celebrating the risen Christ and calling on him today as the Good Shepherd who leads us and takes care of us. This is a good opportunity to stop and take our bearings as we journey through the weeks of Easter.

Today is also Vocations Sunday, reminding us that through our baptism each one of us has been called to holiness of life. Our shared vocation is to live as a disciple of Christ, whether we are single, married, Religious or ordained.

When we pause and look at our Lord in the light of his Resurrection we see ourselves differently and we see others differently too. We recognise them as God's children who are loved – not for any merit of their own but because the Father sees the image of his beloved Son in them. The First Letter of St Peter reminds us that it is through the cross that this image has been restored in us: *He was bearing our faults in his own body on the cross...through his wounds you have been healed.*

Our Lord uses a special image to describe the wonderful relationship that we enjoy with him because of our baptism into his death and resurrection. We are *the people who belong to his pasture, the flock that is led by his hand* in Psalm 94 – and in Psalm 99 *we are his people, the sheep of his flock*. He draws upon the psalms which he prayed every day to reveal to us the mission received from his Father who is Israel's faithful shepherd.

When we recognise the true identity of the Good Shepherd then we see more clearly who we are – the sheep for whom he has laid down his life and for whose sake he has taken it up again

to share it with us. We realise how fragile our Christian way of life can be if we wander far from the flock under his care. We need the Good Shepherd to guide us safely home: *I am the gate. Anyone who enters through me will be safe: he will...be sure of finding pasture.*

The Church – *the flock that is led by his hand* - exists not only to benefit her own members but to be of service to the world. The pastors of the Church – bishops, priests and deacons – are called not only to look after the flock in their charge. They are also called to go out, to look for the lost sheep and to call others into the fold.

On this Vocations Sunday we pray for vocations to the ordained ministries of priesthood and the permanent diaconate, as well as to married and consecrated life. These vocations are of equal worth and dignity, but I would ask you to pray especially today for vocations to the priesthood because our need is great - and please keep in your prayers the seven seminarians who are currently in formation at St Alban's College in Valladolid, the Venerable English College in Rome and St Mary's College, Oscott.

We also pray for all those who are discerning their vocation to the diocesan priesthood at this time – that the voice of the Good Shepherd will make their hearts burn within them, as it did with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. I invite you to pray for future priests to serve our parish communities, thinking of those who may be needed to serve your own parish in the years ahead.

This year the Diocesan Vocations Office has developed a new initiative to encourage us to pray for vocations. Each deanery has been invited to pray for vocations during a particular month - and it may be that your month of prayer has already taken place this year. This is a wonderful opportunity for our parishes and Catholic schools to work together to deepen our understanding of how Our Lord is calling us to follow him.

Today there is a second collection for the Clergy Training Fund, helping to form the priests of the future for our diocesan family. Thank you for helping to fund the seven years of seminary formation that lead towards ordination.

I also thank each one of you at church or at home for enabling the loving voice of the Good Shepherd to stir the hearts of many to respond to his calling today. The sheep that listen to his voice are called to respond to the needs of others in his name. May the Good Shepherd lead us onward, lay faithful and Religious, priests and deacons together - rejoicing and confident this Eastertide that we have something of great value to share with the world.

Yours devotedly in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Bernard Longley". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

✠Bernard Longley
Archbishop of Birmingham

Given at Birmingham on the 26 April 2023 and appointed to be read in all Churches and Chapels of the Archdiocese on the Fourth Sunday of Easter (29/30 April 2023)