



DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE  
OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

## I WILL GIVE YOU SHEPHERDS VOCATIONS TO THE PRIESTHOOD

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

The Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, has declared June 19, 2009 to June 19, 2010 as the *Year For Priests*. He has invited the Church throughout the world to join together in prayer and reflection on the theme, *The Faithfulness of Christ, the Faithfulness of the Priest*. The priests of our Diocese are remarkable men, totally committed to Christ and His Church, dedicated to serving you in our parishes and all the other pastoral initiatives that make up this Diocese on Long Island. They are my closest collaborators, my brothers, whom I am privileged to send to you so that the life of Christ might be proclaimed, nourished and witnessed across Long Island.

As part of the *Year For Priests* I have already written a personal letter to all my brother priests to share my thoughts and prayers on the meaning of the priesthood of Jesus Christ in which we share. It is a ministerial priesthood which is ordained to serve you, the priestly people of God. Ordained priests come from the families and parishes where you, the People of God, live and pass on the faith. Good and zealous as our priests here on Long Island are, we need more priests because, as Pope John Paul reminded us, “there will never be sufficient priests for the proclamation of the Gospel and the pastoral care of the People of God”. For that reason I am writing this pastoral letter to all the faithful of our Diocese. My aim is to explain as best I can the dynamic of a call to the priesthood and then invite us all to become one in prayer for vocations. I want to encourage you to encourage vocations to priesthood and religious life in your homes, your parishes and all the other places where your witness to Christ makes such a difference.

We need priests and consecrated women and men. Vocations are one of the signs of a Church alive. Your enthusiastic cooperation with me and your pastors in this effort of prayer and encouragement will make a great difference. It will be answered by a generous God with more and more vocations to serve our Church. While I will be speaking in this letter about vocations to priesthood, this letter is not limited to vocations to the diocesan priesthood. What I say applies equally to vocations to religious life. We need women and men who respond to God’s call to enter religious life and become consecrated sisters and brothers and priests. They

are special witnesses of the Kingdom of God which was at the heart of Jesus' preaching and is the goal toward which we all are going in our spiritual journey of faith. May Mary, the Mother of the Church, intercede with her Son, the one eternal High Priest, that vocations to priesthood and consecrated life will flourish in our Diocese to the glory of God and the service of all our brothers and sisters now and for future generations.

## **I. WHAT IS A VOCATION TO PRIESTHOOD AND WHY DO WE NEED PRIESTS?**

There is no doubt that we have a pressing need for more priests given the large number of faithful who make up this, the fifth largest diocese in the United States. Yet this is not primarily a question of numbers. Nor is it born of any desire to "clericalize" the life of this Church. Our Church on Long Island is a vibrant Church in which priests and deacons, consecrated men and women and the lay faithful respect one another and one another's gifts and work together to build up the Body of Christ. Because we are a living, vibrant Church, I have been praying daily with great hope that God will bless us by calling an increasing number of men to follow His Son and enter the seminary to serve this Church as presbyters. I write to beg you to join me, beseeching God to send laborers into the harvest so that this Church may grow and be so nourished by the Eucharist and the sacraments that we will be an ever effective Church that is "light to the world" "that the world might believe".

We need men who want to be formed "after His own heart", the heart of the Father Who sent His Son into the world, the heart of the Son which beat with love for every human being till His last breath on the cross, hearts like His that are as one in the bond of the Holy Spirit which Father and Son pour into our hearts that we may be His disciples.

The core of a priestly vocation is found at the Last Supper when Jesus gave the Church her greatest and most precious treasure: His Body and Blood in the Eucharist. He gave it to us and for us. "This is my Body **for you**. This is my Blood **for you**." He commanded His apostles, "to do this in memory of Me". And then He showed them what it meant to be chosen by Him and sent by Him. He washed their feet and said "As I have washed your feet, so you too are to wash the feet of one another". The ones He had chosen "to follow Him", the ones to whom He had entrusted the keys to bind and loose, the ones who, in imitation of Him, were to serve and not to be served, the ones who were called to be configured to Him, the eternal High priest, and

spend their lives to shepherd the flock, these are the ones who form the episcopacy and the priesthood. The bishop and priest are of the very *esse*, the very being of the Church.

It has become popular these days to say “we are the Church”. When spoken in a true faithful way, it is a reminder that all of us together by our baptism form a priestly people who share in the call to holiness. Both priesthood and episcopacy exist as sacraments of holy orders to lead, teach and sanctify this priestly people. However, spoken in a kind of worldly sense of power and control, it runs the risk of pitting laity versus priest and bishop which is simply wrong. Bishop and priest are not opposed to or at odds with the laity. There is no Church without bishop and priest because without them we do not have the necessary pastors to teach and guide us all in faithfulness. Without them we do not have the Eucharist and there can be no Church without the Eucharist. Thus we would be missing the necessary elements of the very *esse*, the very being of the Church.

A holy and priestly people, a Church that is a community of communion, cannot be who she is called to be without bishops and priests. That is why the prayer for vocations must be an integral part of the prayer life of every Church throughout the world. A Church needs to seek God’s generous love to be expressed in His call to men to become priests. This prayer must come from our hearts, be constant and filled with hope. A good God does not overlook the needs of His people. The prayer of all the People of God is powerful. It touches God. It certainly will influence prospective candidates for the priesthood. Generosity on the part of good and solid Catholic men is not lacking today. What then might be lacking?

What may be lacking is a concerted effort on our part to seek out and encourage vocations to the priesthood in our own families, our parishes and schools, our many and various Catholic organizations. What may be lacking is a conversion of attitude on our part that not only recognizes the need for priests but which commits oneself to being a positive force of supporting priestly vocations. What may be lacking is our prayerful support in giving the right kind of men a true sense of appreciation for the sacrifice they make and for the life they will lead as priests of Jesus Christ to pastor the flock of God’s holy and beloved ones.

There is no question that young people are generous today. They willingly give their time and talent to help others. They make many sacrifices in the midst of a world which has placed a certain priority on material goods and consumption as the means for human satisfaction. There is no question that the world in which we live offers many distractions that can obscure the

meaning of following Christ. There is no question that it is hard today to make the kind of lifelong commitment that priesthood demands. Some will dismiss it. Others will ridicule it. But how can we call ourselves faithful Catholics if we take part in that destructive mindset or indulge in those kinds of disparaging actions that tear down the priesthood or make it an object of derision in the eyes of young people who are searching to be good, generous and self giving?

In his Holy Thursday letter of 2003 to Priests, the Servant of God John Paul II told us “there will never be sufficient priests for the work of the Gospel and the pastoral care of the People of God”. That was true then. It is true today and will always be true. But that is not a cause for discouragement or a reason to give up. Just the opposite! It is a time for renewal of heart and mind, of prayer and word that unites us all together as one Church acknowledging our need for good and holy priests, praying they will be given to us and encouraging those we know to consider this as the greatest spiritual adventure God can offer anyone! Our Diocese, from its very beginning, was blessed with so many good and faithful Catholics and yet we never had a healthy proportion of priests in relation to the numbers of Catholic faithful. Through the years many priests from religious orders came to know and love the diocesan priesthood on Long Island. A goodly number of them serve us today in our parishes. In the last decades we have been blessed with generous priests from other parts of the world, especially Africa and India and Latin America.

When I meet with young men to talk about priesthood, the most frequently asked question is “How did you know God was calling you to priesthood?” Some of this is the normal curiosity about another person and his experience. Some of it comes from a genuine desire to know better what makes up a vocation to see if he himself has what is needed to be a priest. Some of it comes from a certain anxiety which is normal. We don’t “know” for certain that we have a true vocation until the day we are actually called by the bishop to be ordained. But in the meantime we all have to discern if God is calling us. Each prospective candidate has to ask himself: do I have the disposition to respond freely and with full consent to that call? This is accomplished through the formation processes that go on in our seminaries. It is the formation process Pope John Paul II described with such wisdom in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, I will give you shepherds.

There are four elements that constitute a call to vocation. The first and most important is God. God knows from all eternity whom He calls to be priests. That is why the person who

feels called or is wondering about it needs to be very conscious that it is God's initiative, not his own. We test our heart and our mind, our dispositions, our openness, our capacity to live a priestly life. In short we discern if we have the "goods", the right "stuff" to be a priest. But whatever we may think, we must pray and act with the knowledge that if it is real it is because it comes from God. He knows from all eternity whom He has chosen. He makes the call. And He makes that call when He wills and when He knows it is best for the potential candidate at a very specific time or moment in the life of that candidate. Whomever and whenever God calls, He wishes that man to be a priest after the heart of His own Son.

The second element that must be present in every real vocation to priesthood is an encounter with Jesus Christ. We can know what God asks of us only through the Son He sent into the world. How many young people today are discovering the true meaning of life when they experience Him Who is brother and friend, savior and beloved of all! In the time I spend with young people, I am constantly renewed and my spirit is lifted by their enthusiasm for Jesus. When they encounter Him and ask "where are you staying?" He invites them always "to come and see". When they ask the Church "We want to see Jesus", we have the solemn responsibility to bring Him to them and them to Him. When they experience His love, His care, His offer of life to them, they "fall in love" with the One Who has already loved them.

The encounter with Jesus opens up a new future for all who seek Him sincerely. If God has chosen the young man, then the encounter with Christ leads him to recognize that the priesthood can be the place where he will discover the third element of his life: a mission which comes from God through Jesus and the Church. In our Diocese, that mission is most often fulfilled in the greatest of ways through pastoral ministry. This ministry whose source and summit is the Eucharist is one in which the priest offers himself to God's people in imitation of Jesus. The priest is the pastor and leader of the community of communion which is the parish, a portion of the Diocese. He is no mere "coordinator" of the ministries of others. He and he alone is the true spiritual guide and pastor of the hearts and souls of the people to whom he is sent by the bishop. He is called to sanctify them through his own prayer and through the sacramental life of the Church. He is called to teach them the truth about God and man, thus opening up to the people the unfathomable and inexhaustible riches of God's message of life and love. This is the Good News that Jesus, Son of God made man, has died for us all and has risen to pour forth the Spirit of God's love into the hearts of all believers, all members of His Body, His Church.

Above all, the priest is called to celebrate the Eucharist, the source and summit of our life as the Body of Christ. The Eucharist is the greatest gift Jesus left us the night before He died. Without the Sunday Eucharist we cannot live. With it the priest has the exalted responsibility to bring Christ daily into the lives of the people and to nourish them with the Body of Blood of the Lord of Life, the sure means to be one with Him who is “the way, the truth and the life”.

There is a fourth element: the candidate himself. He must be open to the working of the Holy Spirit in his life and be helped to understand what it means so that he might make a fully free and informed consent to God’s call. The Lord never forces a man to be a priest. He never takes away freedom. He knows that one of the ways we image God is that we are free to say yes or no. And so He allows us to decide. He wants any decision to seek priesthood to be a fully free and fully informed consent because He respects each person’s dignity and He wants that free consent to be a consent for life. To become a priest is to be configured to Jesus Christ, to receive an indelible ontological change in his very being that conforms him to Christ. That gift that marks him forever demands that he willingly, lovingly and totally give himself over to the One Who loved him and called him, to the One Who sends him to feed the sheep and to feed the lambs of His Church. He must have a “heart after the very heart of Christ himself”.

## **II. THE CENTRALITY OF PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS TO PRIESTHOOD AND RELIGIOUS LIFE**

And that is where we enter in. How can we not fulfill our role of supporting those who aspire to be priests? How can we not storm heaven with our prayers, make our own the needs of the Church, encourage likely candidates to come and see, become ourselves models of holiness, a holiness which finds its source in the Eucharist and its model in Jesus, the one eternal High priest! If we want priests – and we do because we cannot live as Church here on Long Island without them – then we need to pray for them and to support them. If necessary, we need to have a change of heart about the importance of priesthood and the need for men to “come and see”. We must all become actively involved in encouraging vocations through our prayer, our witness, our word and our deed. Vocations cannot grow in a desert of indifference or apathy. Vocations need to be developed in families where priesthood and consecrated life are respected and supported. They must be part of the prayer life of every parish and school in our Diocese. Vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life must be made to be seen by young people as a

true and valuable option for life, for a life well-chosen giving joy and freedom to all who are called to it. Vocations must be seen as a good that is good for those persons who can see in the lives and attitudes of our priests of today a sense of joy and fulfillment, an eagerness to serve as holy priests for a holy people.

### **III. THE YEAR FOR PRIESTS: THE YEAR OF VOCATIONS**

In declaring this *Year For Priests*, Our Holy Father gives us all a new opportunity to pray for the holiness of priests and to pray that many will hear and heed the call of God, Whose Son speaks in the hearts of those chosen, “come, follow me”. For us to be instruments of this desire of the Church for holy and humble priests of Jesus Christ, I am declaring that this *Year for Priests* be in our Diocese a special Year of Vocations.

The Lord Himself told us that the harvest is great but the laborers are few. But He also told us not to accept this as a given and be satisfied with it. We must pray and pray and pray that God will choose men and send laborers into the harvest. We must beseech Him for priests for the Church who will go into the world to bring His message of salvation, to lead and pasture His people, to teach and make holy the disciples of Christ. We must ask Him for priests who will make their own His message, that wondrous message of hope and salvation for one and all “that the world may believe”.

What a gift this *Year For Priests* is for us! How can we let it slip by without making this intention an active part of our lives during this coming year? The Church on Long Island can become an ever more awesome witness of Christ’s love if we can make vocations the object of our prayer, our speech, and our actions. With more than 1.5 million Catholics, with men and women from every continent of the world living here, with every manner of background and every type of personality, think of how rich with talent and vibrant with life, the priesthood could be on this island. Already we have a presbyterate that abounds with gifts. Already we have so many priests who serve in so many ways and with great holiness, great zeal and great love. How much more could we have if together we ask the Lord of the Harvest to send laborers into this harvest of the Catholic Church of Long Island. God is ready! God is kind and generous! He wants to bless us with vocations. We have only to respond, to cooperate with His grace and to make our commitment to vocations a central part of our awareness, our prayer and our collaboration in this year and in the years ahead. Here are some of the ways we will do that.

#### IV. SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

1. First and most importantly, I am inviting every family to pray at home for vocations. I am requesting that in every parish, the Masses of Sundays and holydays include a specific prayer for vocations to priesthood in the Prayer of the Faithful. Every parish is to have a monthly holy hour before the Blessed Sacrament exposed to pray for vocations to priesthood and consecrated life. I am asking that the same be done in our three diocesan high schools as well as in the chapels of houses of religious institutes of consecrated life. The Dominican Sisters of Amityville do this in their motherhouse and I thank them for it.

2. Devotion to the rosary is deeply held and widely observed by the faithful of our diocese. I am asking all who pray the rosary to make vocations to the priesthood one of the objects of their intentions and to offer as well the fifth joyful mystery, the Finding of Jesus in the Temple, a special offering to plead for vocations.

3. The Office of Vocations under the leadership of Father Brian Barr has been re-configured. The four high school chaplains are now also associate vocation directors working as a team with Father Barr to encourage vocations at the high school as well as at the college level. They are developing new opportunities to explore the meaning and to discern the possibility of a priestly vocation. They will be having special meetings and conferences to open up the possibility of a priestly vocation to those who might be called by God. The Office of Vocations will presently launch a special website you can find through [www.drvc.org](http://www.drvc.org). Other offices of the Diocese and especially *The Long Island Catholic* and *Telecare* offer programs aimed at encouraging vocations. The Boy Scouts, under the leadership of Austin Cannon, continue to foster vocations to the priesthood and religious life through their Pope Pius XII Religious Emblem and their current project on designing a merit badge for the *Year For Priests*.

4. The Seminary of the Immaculate Conception will be inviting young people to the Seminary the third Friday of every month from 7:30 to 9:00 pm with a Holy Hour of song and praise to pray for vocations. This will include reflection and recreation and sports afterwards. We urge young men to come to these, to get to know some others who are considering a vocation and to deepen their sense of what priesthood means. In April and May the Seminary will host four pilgrimages to the Seminary, one for each of the four counties across Long Island: Brooklyn, Queens, Nassau and Suffolk.

During this *Year For Priests*, the seminarians will be allowed to visit parishes on most weekends to offer a brief reflection after Communion at the Sunday Masses. They will go in twos and will be happy to tell their vocation story especially to young men who may want to meet them and talk with them about the priesthood. The Seminary also has four attractive posters about the building blocks of priesthood for distribution to parishes and schools.

5. The Aspirancy program will be continued. A young man who has been in conversation with Father Barr and accepts to fulfill some conditions of daily life, regular prayer and spiritual direction, is offered \$1,000 a semester to help with his tuition until he makes a decision about entering seminary or not.

Through all these efforts, but especially through our prayer, we will keep before our eyes and those of the young men of our Diocese the holy men whose priestly lives were the instruments of God's salvation for the people of our Diocese and of the whole Church. Sainly men like Bishops John McGann and James McHugh, will inspire young people and aid us by their prayers. From the apostles to Pope John Paul II, great saints of our Church such as St. Francis de Sales and the Curé of Ars will also inspire young men. Above all, we will pray to Mary and with Mary, the Mother of the Church, for vocations to the priesthood for the whole Church but especially for this Church of Rockville Centre which is under her protection and the protection of St. Agnes, the martyr saint.

Finally allow me to say a word about the priests who serve today in our Diocese. I know them and know them well. They are good and holy men. They seek to be models to young men simply by the witness of their lives of service to God's people. In the *Year For Priests*, I have been meeting with them in the deaneries for an informal gathering of prayer and reflection. I invite them to share with one another what gives them their strength and what helps them be faithful in their lives as priests. I am deeply touched by their words and their witness. You would be moved by the depth of their love for the Lord, the sincerity of their love for you and the honesty of their lives which they give to Christ, His Church. This year, as part of your work for vocations, reach out to your priests. Please tell them what they mean to you. A simple thank you for being a priest is more than enough. But what a spirit of renewal we all would have if we share our love of Christ's priesthood by a renewal of support for our priests! How much will that serve to interest others to consider a priestly vocation and thus continue the blessed tradition in our diocese of priests after the heart of Jesus!

## V. CONCLUSION

This *Year For Priests* and of vocations to the Priesthood opened with Mass on the Feast of the Sacred Heart, June 19. On that day in the Cathedral of St. Agnes, we offered Mass for vocations. From that Mass I wish to invite all the People of God here on Long Island to begin our year-long act of faith in God's goodness, hope in His providence and love for His people. May the Father of mercies bless us. May His Son, the eternal High Priest, repeat His invitation in the hearts of many men to follow Him. And may the Holy Spirit which binds the Church into this one community of communion inspire us all with a new sense of love for the Church and for the priesthood. May we be as one in praising God for the gift of priesthood which serves His Holy People in imitation of Jesus Christ. May He Who promised "to give us shepherds after the heart of His Son, bless us with vocations, bless our priests with renewal of heart and mind and bless our Church, the great witness of His love for all humankind.

Yours devotedly in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "William Murphy". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "W" and a long, sweeping tail.

Bishop of Rockville Centre

November 4, 2009

Feast of St. Charles Borromeo