

# A PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP OF LANCASTER

FOR GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY 4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTERTIDE YEAR C.



**Appointed to be read at all Public Masses in the  
Diocese of Lancaster on the weekend of 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> May 2019**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

When Our Blessed Lord chose the image of the Good Shepherd and His sheep as the model for His Church He had the Diocese of Lancaster in mind. We know what He is talking about because our beautiful Diocese is full of sheep, and shepherds; hardy beasts and hardy people. They are a common enough sight throughout our area, although not so common in Blackpool or Preston of course. Many of you listening to this Pastoral Letter may have read James Rebank's popular book of recent times, 'The Shepherd's Life'. Two thousand years ago Our Lord chose words that we can understand even in our own times. We are people of Faith: the things of this world teach us about the things of eternity. The Bishop's crozier or crook is a present-day sign that Christ still leads His flock through the ministry of the Bishop and his clergy.

This beautiful pastoral image appeals to us in its simplicity. It contains a powerful truth about the relationship Our Blessed Lord wants with us. It presents us with an insight into the nature of God, not as some remote, authoritarian figure but as God directly involved in safeguarding the well-being of His little ones. The Bishop together with his clergy must preserve the true figure of the true God.

Fewer of you will be familiar with St Augustine's homily, 'On the shepherds', or St Gregory the Great's 'Pastoral Rule', or so many other Christian writings from across the ages drawing on the simple image of shepherd and flock. The word 'pastoral' points us to the Good Shepherd as does the word 'Pastor'. Jesus declares Himself to be the Good Shepherd who knows His flock, calls each one by name, and promises to lay down His life for His sheep. He commands Peter to feed His lambs, to look after His sheep. They need to be fed. They need to be protected. The Bishop and his clergy must continue to obey this command.

Present day sheep farmers, like James Rebanks, must keep a keen eye on the changing spring weather. An old shepherd in upper Wyresdale once told me it's the combination of cold and wet that threatens most. A Shepherd in Ravenglass once told me that if people ever saw what a fox does with lambs they would understand why foxes are so hated. Look out over a field of young lambs and you'll often notice crows and gulls amongst them. The birds are only there for one thing, and if you watch for long enough you may have your stomach turned when you see them strike. The pastoral scene is not always pretty. The Bishop and his clergy must be constantly vigilant against whatever threatens the flock, especially the young and weak.

On this Vocations Sunday we take note of Christ's words about His sheep, 'they listen to my voice . . . they follow me . . . they will never be lost . . . no one can steal them from me . . . ' This could be the voice of any good Cumbrian or Lancashire sheep-farmer. They must be the words in the hearts of the Bishop and his clergy

The Church exists to make present and continue the Mission of Jesus Christ. It must put away any image that would distort His features or weaken our understanding of Him, or lessen our sense of His care, or silence His voice. Lives are at stake. Eternal life is at stake. The Bishop and his clergy are a constant reminder of this.

But it is not all about the Bishop and his clergy. Parents naturally want what is best for their children. They want them to be safe. They want them to be happy. And they are the first protectors of their children. They are the first to teach their children about God and the ways of Faith. Any who deny them this or delay to teach them about the spiritual life cannot know God. Those who delay Baptism or neglect it altogether put themselves and their children at risk. Only blind ignorance can be their defence. The Bishop and his clergy must promote sound teaching and knowledge of the one, true God.

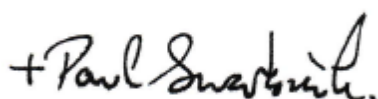
Our Diocese needs good, committed Catholics. We need families where husband and wife combine to raise children who know that the love of God is real. Single parents are not 'second-class'. They too can build homes in which the Lord is known and His call is heard clearly. We need parents and teachers courageous and generous enough to encourage their children to take seriously a vocation to the Religious Life. And we need parents who respect and value the ordained Priesthood enough to encourage their sons to consider this as their way of life, their way to heaven. The Bishop and his clergy are sons of such parents.

I have no doubt that such parents are to be found in our Diocese. Let us speak positively about such things. I ask you to reflect on these words, and turn your reflections into prayers, and turn your prayers into actions.

The Church in its humanity has many flaws, one of them is writing this Pastoral Letter! I am no theologian, but I have been given the heart of a shepherd, and so have some of the young men listening to this. I appeal to you this Sunday to create a 'vocations culture' in your parish. Such a culture will allow Christ to call forth priests for our parishes, shepherds for His flock.

Finally, please pray for your Bishop and his clergy. Please pray particularly for our young clergy. Please pray for Deacon Stephen Talbutt who is to be ordained to the Priesthood in July this year. Please pray for our two seminarians, Stuart Chapple and Philip Wrigley.

With my prayers and blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+Paul Swarbrick". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

+Paul Swarbrick  
Bishop of Lancaster