

Dear brothers and sisters,

As we gather together on this Laetare Sunday, a day of rejoicing amidst our Lenten journey, we are reminded of the infinite love and compassion of our Heavenly Father. Today, we also celebrate Mothering Sunday, a time to honour and give thanks for the nurturing love of mothers and all those who have cared for us with a mother's heart. It is a Sunday rooted in the Lenten Journey and the connection to our Mother communities and parishes.

In the readings this weekend, we encounter the powerful imagery of light and darkness. John's Gospel speaks of Jesus as the light of the world, who brings illumination and salvation to all who believe in him. In our own lives, we are called to reflect this light to others, sharing the hope and joy of the Gospel with all whom we encounter. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis urges each of us to ensure that our parishes are places of deep welcome for all who seek out the Lord as they journey through the joys and sorrows of life, as well as communities with a tireless missionary impulse reaching out to everyone without exception. In short, a church that is a mother with an open heart.

Each of us has a unique role to play in the life of our faith community. Whether through prayer, service, or financial support, we can all contribute to the vibrant life of our parishes. As we reflect on the readings and the challenges before us, let us ask ourselves how we can more fully live out our baptismal call to be disciples of Christ. We will need to consider how we maintain our Catholic communities in prayer, how we provide catechesis for those approaching the Sacraments and how those Sacraments are celebrated. We will need to consider how we care for our sick, the vulnerable and the bereaved who turn to the church in their time of greatest need.

As we rejoice in the light of Christ, we cannot ignore the shadows that darken our path. One such shadow is the declining number of priests available to serve our parishes. At present, the 6 priests available within our city – 3 diocesan and 3 religious – celebrate 11 Masses each Sunday (2 Vigil Masses and 9 Masses during the day). With fewer priests available in the future, we simply cannot continue with the same number of Masses that are currently celebrated across the city each week. It may be in the not do distant future we will need to consider how Masses can be provided with only 2 priests available to the city centre. This may require us to make difficult decisions about how we allocate our resources and prioritize our ministries. This reality challenges us to consider how we can ensure that our spiritual lives are nurtured, that our communities flourish, and how the Good News continues to be proclaimed.

Whilst the acute shortage of priests throughout our diocese could be considered a crisis for the church, from a theological point of view, it may be that the Holy Spirit is at work calling each of us to discern what it means to be a Catholic who is part of the worshipping community of Newcastle City Centre and, crucially, how are we to live that out.

In the coming months we hope to be able to hold a number of meetings so that as many of us across the city can come together to discern a way forward for us. We ask that you consider these issues, to take them to prayer and even discuss them with one another in the weeks and months ahead. We will publish the dates, times, and venues of our City Centre meetings in the newsletter as and when they are arranged.

As we discern the way forward, let us entrust our concerns and hopes to the loving care of our Heavenly Father. Let us pray for an outpouring of vocations to the priesthood and religious life and let us support those who are discerning a call to serve God's people in this way. And let us continue to rely on the grace of the Holy Spirit to guide us in our efforts to ensure that God's light shines brightly in our midst.

May this Laetare Sunday be a moment of renewal and recommitment for each of us. Let us rejoice in the love of God, the care of mothers, and the support of our faith community, as we journey together towards the light of Easter.

With prayers and blessings,

Your City Centre Priests