

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dear Parishioners and visitors to our website,

This Sunday, 4 August, is the feast of St. John Marie Vianney, the cure/parish priest of Ars. Since the reign of Pope Pius XI, who canonised him a saint, he has been the patron saint of the secular clergy. It is thus a particularly happy coincidence that this year the Archdiocese of Birmingham has designated Our Lady & St. Anne as the venue of prayer for vocations on this particular feast day. There is a large chart in the narthex indicating which parishes/churches/oratories across the diocese have been designated, and the dates on which the communities linked to these places of worship are asked to set time aside to pray for vocations. The campaign of prayer runs throughout the year and across the diocese. This year three men were ordained to the priesthood for service in the diocese and news has come through that a further three commence seminary training in the autumn. We will pray in thanksgiving for those ordained priests, and for those at the initial stage of their priestly formation, that they may persevere and that a life as priests may bring them fulfilment and happiness.

The Catholic Church cannot survive without priests. Our central act of worship, without which the local communities cannot exist, is the Mass. All the sacraments, the devotional life and the unique fellowship which characterises the Catholic parish is impossible without the Eucharist. And thus, it follows, without priests. Up until the recent past, most parishes took it completely for granted that the Church would provide them with a priest, and in a more distant past often with two or three priests to assist the pastor. Now parishes that were thriving within living memory are being fused with others: one priest is being asked to serve a cluster of parishes and a variety of different communities. It is much more difficult to create a sense of parish as *local church* when the priest is a migratory bird with several nests to care for. The need for more priests is obvious. And most communities who do have a dedicated day of prayer for vocations understand that intention in terms of numerical increase.

Given that it is thirty two years since I crossed the threshold of the seminary, and twenty-eight years since I was ordained, it is my view that on these days we also need to hold in prayer those men who have behind them long lives of priestly service and approach an uncertain future with some apprehension. Not only must those already in ministry be prayed for but the communities across the diocese must ask themselves, can they put forward a candidate for Holy Orders. Priests can only be parachuted in by the Bishop if there are men who offer themselves for ordination. In days gone by priests came from Ireland – no English diocese could have survived without them – but that supply chain no longer exists. A priest is born into a family, he may be a gift his family makes to the Church, but he is above all things a man who makes a gift of himself to the Lord Jesus because he believes that the Kingdom of God can only be established on earth if he too, with his gifts, his capacities and his faith, becomes a disciple of the Lord and – as every priest is challenged to do on the day of his ordination – conforms himself to the cross of Christ.

Father Patrick