

Pastoral Letter on the Priesthood and Religious Life

Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Salva me bona crux! Save me, good cross! According to tradition, this is the dying prayer of St Andrew. He said these words as he prepared to give his life for his faith in Jesus.

But in the Roman world, the cross was anything but “good.” It was a cruel instrument of torture. To proclaim a crucified King was offensive to some and foolish to others.¹ But, for St Andrew, the contradictory sign of the cross was a symbol of salvation. It was a sign of hope.

For St Andrew, the cross was also a sign pointing out the way that would lead him to Heaven. The cross offered to him on the day of his martyrdom was a reminder of the new commandment given by Jesus: ‘Love one another, as I have loved you.’² The cross was a personal call from his Lord and Master: ‘Come, follow me.’³

There are many people today who are looking for a sign. Does this life have any meaning? Does my own personal life have a purpose? Why am I here? To many people, our modern world feels like the lonely desert of the Exodus. Sin has caused a mysterious, spiritual sickness and people are looking for a cure. Hungry stomachs grumble for real food. Parched throats thirst for living water.

In our first reading, we heard how Moses held up a mysterious, contradictory sign to the people of his generation.⁴ Like the cross of Jesus, it brought healing and forgiveness to a hurting people. Like the cross of Jesus, it saved them from death. Like the cross of Jesus, it brought new hope, when all hope seemed lost.

God is calling men and women today to be signs of hope to this generation. He’s calling them to be courageous leaders like Moses. He’s calling them to be joyful messengers of his Good News like St Andrew. He’s calling them to find in his cross the way of true love. He is calling them to serve him and his Church in the priesthood and in the religious life.

In our second reading, Paul describes how Jesus ‘emptied himself’ to become a servant of his brothers and sisters.⁵ To want to become priest or a religious today doesn’t mean aspiring to a position of privilege or power. To want to become a priest or a religious is to want to love like Jesus. This means giving God everything, holding nothing back. It means giving him our gifts and talents, but also our weakness and limitations.

It means remembering that we must first receive God’s forgiveness before sharing it with others. It means remembering that, before we preach, we must first listen carefully to the word spoken by the one, true Teacher. It means remembering that we can only ever be true leaders by remembering that we are followers of a crucified King.

Living like Jesus means making sacrifices. Becoming a priest or a religious means imitating Jesus in his simple poverty, his holy purity and his faithful obedience. But Jesus asks us to make sacrifices only so that he can give us even greater gifts. He is never outdone in generosity. In this way, the cross is the way to true joy, and a peace the world cannot give.

As Jesus made his way to Calvary, Simon of Cyrene helped him to carry the cross which would save the world. Could you help him carry the cross today? Veronica wiped his holy face when others couldn't bear to look at him. Could you see his face today in the least of his brothers and sisters?

After his Resurrection, Mary Magdalene announced to the apostles the good news of his victory. Andrew and the others brought that good news to the very ends of the earth. Who will share the joy of the Gospel with this generation? Who will proclaim the hope of his salvation today?

God is looking for courageous prophets to tell the truth to his people. Jesus is looking for humble servants who will wash the feet of their fellow disciples. The Holy Spirit is already stirring in generous hearts a fire of creative love that will set the whole world ablaze.

Jesus said to his disciples, 'take up your cross and follow me!'⁶ During this Vocations Awareness Week, let us pray that the call of Christ will be heard in our Church in Scotland and find in the hearts of our young people a generous response.

With every good wish and blessing,



+John Keenan
Bishop President, Priests for Scotland

1 Cf. 1 Corinthians 1:23.

2 John 13:34.

3 Matthew 4:19.

4 Numbers 21:4b-9.

5 Philippians 2:6-11.

6 Matthew 16:24