



DIOCESE OF HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE

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Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle*



5 September 2018

Pastoral Letter to be read in all parishes weekend of 8th and 9th September 2018

My dear people

Pope Francis issued a Letter to the People of God, which was published by the Holy See on 20th August 2018. The Pope's letter followed the recent news of reports from several countries around the world where bishops, leaders of religious congregations, clergy and others within the Church have failed to protect children, young people and vulnerable adults from sexual and other forms of abuse. In some cases, attempts were made, or appear to have been made, to cover up that abuse. In his letter, Pope Francis addresses the suffering caused by this abuse, expressing deep sorrow for the 'heart-wrenching pain' of victims and giving voice to the shame of the whole Church. He also calls for all to be 'committed along a journey of renewed conversion' within each person and within the Church.

I know that some Parishes have already made the Pope's letter available for people to take away and read for themselves, and I ask that all Parishes do the same at this weekend's Masses. Please read the letter slowly and prayerfully, listening to the Holy Spirit who speaks through the words of Pope Francis.

Some people both within and beyond the Church believe that the Pope's letter is just more pious words and that it lacks action. They doubt that his call to fasting, penance and prayer is enough in the face of this grave crisis, and the deep pain that it has caused and continues to cause to so many innocent victims. But his letter shows that Pope Francis hears the cry of these victims, which have been silenced and denied for too long. He understands that their cry speaks to the tragic truth of clerical abuse in the Church around the world. He sees that abuse cannot be put in a file and lost in history - that would be the biggest betrayal of all. The Pope, prompted by the Holy Spirit, always seeks the truth about God and about each person. He has heard the voice of the Holy Spirit in the pain and words of the victims of abuse.

In this Diocese, we are fully committed to safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults as a basic part of the life and ministry of the Church through the promotion of a sustained and sustainable culture of constant vigilance. We recognise the personal dignity and rights of all vulnerable people towards whom we have a special responsibility. We constantly do our utmost to take all the appropriate steps to maintain a safe environment for all, and to practice fully and positively Christ's ministry towards children, young people and vulnerable adults. We respond sensitively and compassionately to their needs in order to help keep them safe from all harm.

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However, Pope Francis is asking us to go much further than safeguarding programmes, procedures and structures, essential though they are. He is asking us all – bishops, clergy, religious and laity - to take our conversion to Jesus seriously. It is what he calls: 'a personal and communal conversion that makes us see things as the Lord does, to be where the Lord wants us to be, to experience a conversion of heart in his presence. To do so, prayer and penance will help.... This can awaken our conscience and arouse our solidarity and commitment to a culture of care that says "never again" to every form of abuse.' We are to open ourselves to renewal which takes on justice and compassion, and that protects everyone from falsehood and exploitation. What the Pope calls 'clericalism' and all other forms of elitism among the laity and clergy alike, he says 'supports and helps to perpetuate many of the evils that we are condemning today. To say "no" to abuse is to say an emphatic "no" to all forms of clericalism.'

Pope Francis calls on us to: 'open our eyes and our hearts to other people's sufferings and to overcome the thirst for power and possessions that are so often the root of those evils.' His hope, and surely ours, is that our fasting and prayer will 'open our ears to the hushed pain felt by children, young people and the disabled. A fasting that can make us hunger and thirst for justice and impel us to walk in the truth, supporting all the judicial measures that may be necessary. A fasting that shakes us up and leads us to be committed in truth and charity with all men and women of good will, and with society in general, to combatting all forms of the abuse of power, sexual abuse and the abuse of conscience.'

The way ahead will take time, and it's God's time. I would suggest that a Holy Hour be organised in every parish throughout the Diocese between 1st and 6th October. I pray that all of us in our Diocese will make our prayer and especially our Friday penance the focus for the renewal Pope Francis calls for within the Church. We pray that the grace of Jesus Christ will bring hope to the suffering and healing to the wounds of those who have been so deeply hurt by abuse.

With my very best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads '+ Séamus'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

✠ Rt Rev Séamus Cunningham
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