

The Priests We Want



The Bishop Speaks

This month sees two long-serving priests of the Diocese retire from active ministry as Parish Priests. Fr Bernard Melville is retiring after 42 years as Parish priest of Manilla and 64 years of priesthood. Fr John Carey is retiring after 17 years as Parish priest of Glen Innes and 60 years of priesthood. They have both been faithful labourers in the vineyard of the Lord working in close cooperation with the 6 most recent of the 10 Bishops of Armidale.

One could say that Fr Melville and Fr Carey are examples of the quintessential Australian Country Parish Priest: Faithful to God; always available to their people; involving themselves in the local

community; they have gone about performing their sacred duties with down-to-earth realism and humility. They dearly love God and their people, and are dearly loved by God and their people.

Of course, they are not retiring from the priesthood, but from active ministry as Parish Priests. They will continue to exercise the ministerial priesthood of Jesus Christ through their celebration of the Mass, through their prayers and offerings each day to God for the sake of the Church and the World, and through their daily witness and encounters with those they meet.



Thinking of the lives and priesthood of these two faithful men I am reminded of the Readings for Sunday Mass a few weeks ago for the 31st Sunday of Ordinary time which gave us the opportunity to reflect upon the sort of priests that Jesus wants for his Church.

Through the prophet Malachi (1:14 – 2:2,8-10) the Lord reproached those priests who led others astray by their false teachings: “You have caused many to stumble by your teaching.” God wants priests who teach the true teachings of Jesus handed on to us faithfully by the Apostles and their successors the bishops from generation to generation, not their own opinion or the latest trendy theories.

Malachi also laments those priests who have become “contemptible and vile in the eyes of so many people” because they “strayed from the way”. Tragically, some priests have done this and we all feel part of the shame. The Lord wants priests who do not stray in their own conduct because their eyes are fixed on him.

In the Gospel Reading from Matthew (23:1-12) that same Sunday Jesus criticised the Scribes and Pharisees because whilst they may have taught the right thing “they do not practice what they preach” and so were hypocrites. To be a “hypocrite” is the last thing we would expect of a priest, and the thing that disappoints us the most when it does happen.

Another criticism Jesus makes of the Scribes and Pharisees is that “they tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men’s shoulders” but “will not lift a finger to move them” because in the end they weren’t really interested in the people – they were only interested in themselves and in receiving honour and attention. Jesus wants priests who will encourage and help people to live by God’s moral commandments, which do sometimes feel very demanding. And priests will do this when they love the people and not just their own self.

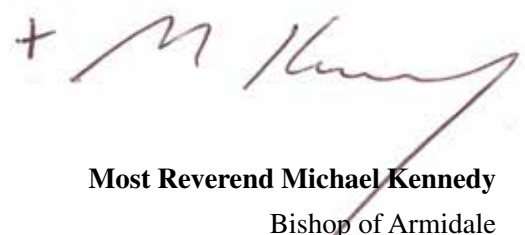
There are plenty of ways a priest can fail, and sadly we sometimes see priests fail massively. The reality is that every priest will fail at times, mostly in small ways. Of course we priests fail – we are human beings with a good but fallen human nature like everybody else, yourself included.

Small failings do not make a priest a bad priest. You know this, and I am very heartened by the love and understanding that people all around the Diocese have for their priests. Just as I am heartened by the love and dedication that I see in all the good but imperfect priests of our Diocese.

*“The Priesthood
is the love of the
heart of Jesus.
When you see a
priest, think of our
Lord Jesus Christ.”*
Saint John Vianney

There is one more type of priest presented to us in the Readings from that 31st Sunday. It is Saint Paul as he writes to the Thessalonians (2:7-9,13), and it is to this type of priest that Jesus wants to attract our gaze. Saint Paul was a priest “like a mother feeding and looking after her own children, devoted and protective towards them”, and coming to love them so much that he wanted to “give his whole self to them”. And the people who heard the message of Jesus’ Gospel from him received it “for what it really is, God’s message and not just some human thinking, and as a living power.”

This is the sort of priest I know you want. It is the sort of priest we have seen in Fr Melville and Fr Carey. It is the sort of priest I want to be. It is the sort of priest I know all the priests of our Diocese want to be. It is the sort of priest Jesus wants us to be. And it is the sort of priest I ask you to pray for us to be.



Most Reverend Michael Kennedy
Bishop of Armidale