

ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE,
WESTMINSTER, LONDON, SW1P 1QJ



Pastoral Letter on the Priesthood

The Nativity of St John the Baptist 23-24 June 2018

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

On the left-hand side of Westminster Cathedral, in the second side Chapel, lie the mortal remains of St John Southworth. In preparation for his Feast Day on 27 June, they move into the middle of the main aisle.

St John Southworth has a very special place in our history and in our hearts. A Lancashire man, he had been ordained a priest in 1619 at the English College in Douai, in northern France, at a time when it was impossible to prepare men for the Catholic priesthood in this country. This year, Douai College is celebrating its 450th anniversary. We are all included in this celebration, for the College is a crucial part of Catholic survival and heritage, succeeded first by St Edmund's College in Ware, Hertfordshire, and then by Allen Hall, our own Diocesan seminary.

To be a Catholic priest in England in those days was considered to be an act of treason and punished by the cruel death of hanging, drawing and quartering. This is how St John Southworth died on 28 June 1654 at Tyburn, near Marble Arch in central London.

By then he was no stranger to central London. His priestly ministry started in Lancashire. But after his first arrest, he was moved to a gaol in London. In 1630, he was spared execution and deported to France. He returned, determined in his mission, to minister in the streets of central London, around Westminster, to those impoverished and sick because of the plague. In 1637, he was again imprisoned. Again, he avoided trial and for 14 years continued his clandestine ministry in our streets, in and out of prison. Finally, in 1654, he was arrested and brought to trial. He refused to deny that he was a priest. The magistrate, sick of so many executions, reluctantly sent him to his death on the gallows.

St John Southworth is a key patron saint of the priests of this Diocese. He is an inspiration and an intercessor for us. We bring his body into the central aisle of the Cathedral not only for his Feast Day but so that he is there among the candidates for the priesthood on the day of their ordination. Next Saturday, in the Cathedral, six men will be ordained priests for service in our parishes. During the singing of the Litany of the Saints, they will prostrate themselves, face down on the floor. In their midst will be the prostrate body of the Martyr.

But he lies face up, reflecting the glory of God shining in him as he now enjoys the fullness of God's grace in heaven. He is indeed our special patron.

Today I ask you to pray for all our priests. Pray particularly for the six new priests and the priest(s) serving in your parish. Our lives may not be as dramatic nor as full of public conflict as the life of St John Southworth. Yet we priests strive to express in our daily ministry exactly the same dedication to the mission of Jesus Our Lord as he did. Like him, we depend on the support and love of faithful people. For St John Southworth that was literally a matter of life and death. While that deadly drama has ended, over the centuries a marvellous tradition has remained of genuine love for priests and a readiness to support them, through thick and thin. I ask you, today, to continue that tradition and share it with your families.

Of course, we priests and bishops are sinners. There is no hiding our mistakes and faults. Indeed, we have learned painfully, that trying to hide major failures, especially in relation to the most vulnerable, seriously compounds the failures and betrayals that so damages our shared mission. Today I express my sorrow at our failings and I ask for your patience, forbearance and, indeed, forgiveness. In the Church, we are bound together in Christ Jesus. He is full of mercy. We can only strive to show that mercy to each other, always and everywhere.

In the months ahead, remembering Douai College and so many martyr priests, we will be striving to renew our priestly mission and purpose. As priests, we will try to encourage each other more steadfastly. This time of renewal will come to a key moment next year, on the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a day set aside by Pope Francis for prayer and renewal for all priests throughout the world. On that day, 28 June 2019, all Diocesan priests in England and Wales will be invited to come to Westminster Cathedral to celebrate together a Mass of thanksgiving and renewal. On that day too, we will gather around the precious body of St John Southworth, knowing that he will intercede for us. I hope and trust that you will do so too.

At Mass today we heard these words: 'The Lord called me before I was born, from my mother's womb he pronounced my name' (Isaiah 49:1). Today they are applied to St John the Baptist. Yet they are words of truth for everyone who hears them, for each of us has a God-given purpose in our lives. Pray, then, for each other, that you may all have that same sense of purpose and dedication in your life. Then you will pray with joy, as I do, the words of today's Psalm: 'I thank you, Lord, for the wonder of my being' (Psalm 138).

Yes, Lord, I thank you every day. Amen.

Yours devotedly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Vincent Nichols". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster