



DIOCESE OF SALFORD

Pastoral Letter of the Right Reverend John Arnold Bishop of Salford

*To be read in all Churches on the weekend of 14/15th February, 2015,
the Sixth Sunday of Ordinary time.*

In Preparation for Lent

My dear Brothers and Sisters,

Rather than writing to you for the First Sunday of Lent, I wanted to write before Ash Wednesday itself which is, in my mind, a most important day as the starting point of the Season of Lent. You will get weary of my liking for new beginnings and fresh starts. For me, Advent, New Year and Ash Wednesday each present moments of particular freshness.

On Ash Wednesday many of us will receive the ashes on our foreheads, with the words: "Remember that you are dust and unto dust you will return" or "Repent, and believe the Gospel". They are not so much a stern reprimand, as a gentle invitation. I firmly believe that most of us, most of the time, are distracted by simply filling our lives with just too much activity. Even when we have a quiet moment we are likely to have the radio or television on somewhere in the background, we have some music on, or we make a quick call to a friend. We can fill any few moments of empty space with the little jobs and chores which, while perfectly good in themselves, keep us away from a time of deliberate silence and recollection. But it is precisely those moments of silence and recollection when we can learn so much about ourselves and get so many things in a better focus. It is in our moments of silence that we can actually stand, as it were, to one side and view our world and our lives from a different perspective. Too often it is in moments of stress or anxiety that we try to make too many decisions. If we can create moments of stillness then our decisions can be prepared in a place of calm.

Why am I talking about decisions? Well, I am all too aware that my new role as Bishop here in Salford must mean that I have to prepare myself to make lots of decisions. I do not want to make them alone and I want to gather the best information from people and priests and religious, all around the Diocese, to help me. I do not want to have to rush important

decisions but rather to prepare well so that decisions are not made in haste nor come as a surprise or shock. This is not meant to sound as though terrible things are about to happen. All I have seen in the last ten weeks speaks of a great deal of life and energy in the Diocese. There are vibrant parish communities and many associations and projects that speak of the Gospel and witness to our Faith. However, we are all aware that the number of priests available for pastoral ministry is declining. The wonderful gift of a generation of priests from Ireland is coming to an end and many priests are approaching retirement and, indeed, continuing past the age of retirement. We will still have many good and dedicated priests, but not in the same number and we must plan so that they can be used in the best way to serve the communities and parishes. Priests must be able to dedicate themselves to priestly duties while other people take on different roles in catechesis, pastoral ministry and administration that they can do so well. All these things will need proper consideration by you and me, together, in the coming year.

These concerns are a firm invitation to me to find that place of reflection and stillness in my own life. No doubt you will have your own concerns, too. How can we use this Season of Lent to help us? I would suggest a simple and very practical first step. Find a place in your home; a corner, a chair, a space that you do not usually use and make that a dedicated space for your quiet moment. Know that, when you go there, it is for the specific purpose of spending a few moments in prayer. Find even ten minutes for your quiet time and go to that place and be determined to place yourself in the presence of God. In order to become still, I would suggest that we use that simple prayer "Stay with us, Lord, on our journey" as a simple phrase that we might repeat to ourselves quietly, and slowly. Be prepared to be surprised by the unusual but refreshing calm that you may discover. Give it a try.

I wish you a very peaceful and productive Lent. Let us pray for one another that we may do all that we have to do as well as we can, always being aware that the Lord works with us and through us. Let us also keep in mind all those men and women who are now preparing to become full members of the Catholic Church at Easter. They will need our welcome, our prayer and our example to sustain them on their own journey with us.

Be assured of my prayers, daily, for you as the family of the Church in the Diocese of Salford.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John".

✠ John Arnold
Bishop of Salford