Bishops Charge

I truly hope that you will find joy in ministry - as I have

Do you trust that you are truly called by God?

I think that Is probably the best question in all of our liturgy. It invites clarity and firmness of response. It's like all the great responses of life in that it helps to create the thing it promises. But it also invites - well humility obviously and perhaps an outer edge of provisionality. And I don't think that clarity and a little bit of provisionality are mutually exclusive.

Traditionally, we have attempted to discern whether a person 'has a vocation'. And if we can discern that a person 'has a vocation' then the doors open to training and ministry in whatever form seems appropriate. Times are changing. My reflection on the way we see vocation today is that it is rather more shared - less of a personal possession - and that it is a changing and dynamic thing - not a static possession.

We are also increasingly concerned to know now vocation is sustained and refreshed - how it grows and develops; what it is that squeezes it and puts pressure on it; how it is rekindled when it is at risk of dying.

The first thing I want to say is that I have gradually learned that I should conduct a constant internal dialogue with my own vocation. I feel it deeply. I can at times physically locate it in my body. It animates my approach to ministry. But it is ever changing - and what changes it is partly my engagement with the people among whom I minister and my I understanding of the context in which I minister. Sometimes the changes are small and nuanced - but sometimes it is more than that. Indeed I am quite clear that I have had more than one vocation myself - at the beginning a vocation to healing and reconciliation and later on a vocation to leadership. What intrigues me about that is not so much how one might discern a new vocation - or a shift in vocation - but how one decides that the time has come to let go of one vocation so that a new vocation can be discerned.

I think, as I said, that you need a constant internal dialogue. That means prayer - which surely is fundamental in bringing clarity. But I think that prayer is also of critical importance in dealing with the things which pressurise vocation - I'm thinking particularly of our tendency to read things in terms of how we ourselves are feeling. So if you are experiencing pain in ministry, prayer will prevent you seeing everything through the lens of how you feel. And if you are feeling lonely and misunderstood - or not understood - prayer will inhibit the growth of self-centredness and self-pity. Alongside prayer go I think a conscious paying attention to mood and attitude - buoyancy, humour, quality of life and well being, the balance between physical health and personal and spiritual well-being.

I simply need to say to you that if your vocation begins to be about you, you are in trouble. And I think that if you feel that vocation is dying you are in trouble too. It is the sheet anchor of ministry

The second question which I want to explore briefly is this, 'Will you be a diligent minister of the word of God, proclaiming the gospel, teaching the Christian faith and upholding catholic doctrine founded on the scriptures.?'

I hear that question as a challenge to depth in ministry. It is very easy - when you are surrounded by people and when you are good with people - for ministry to be about me and my relationships - for it to become just friendliness. But it seems to me that this is about helping people to understand - to get their bearings biblically and theologically in their understanding of the life which they are living. I think that sometimes we overdose on friendliness and accessibility - and if we do that we don't leave space for mystery which is what many people really seek

One can be trite about this. I have sometimes played games in our office by asking 'which bible story are we in at this point?' I think it helps - sometimes the answer is about loaves and fishes and miracles of grace; sometimes it is is about the Exodus and the complicated questions of authority which arose between Moses and God's people.

But in end this is about serving people by empowering them - giving them the tools to understand their lives against the background of their faith and to shape their lives in response.

I wish you joy .....