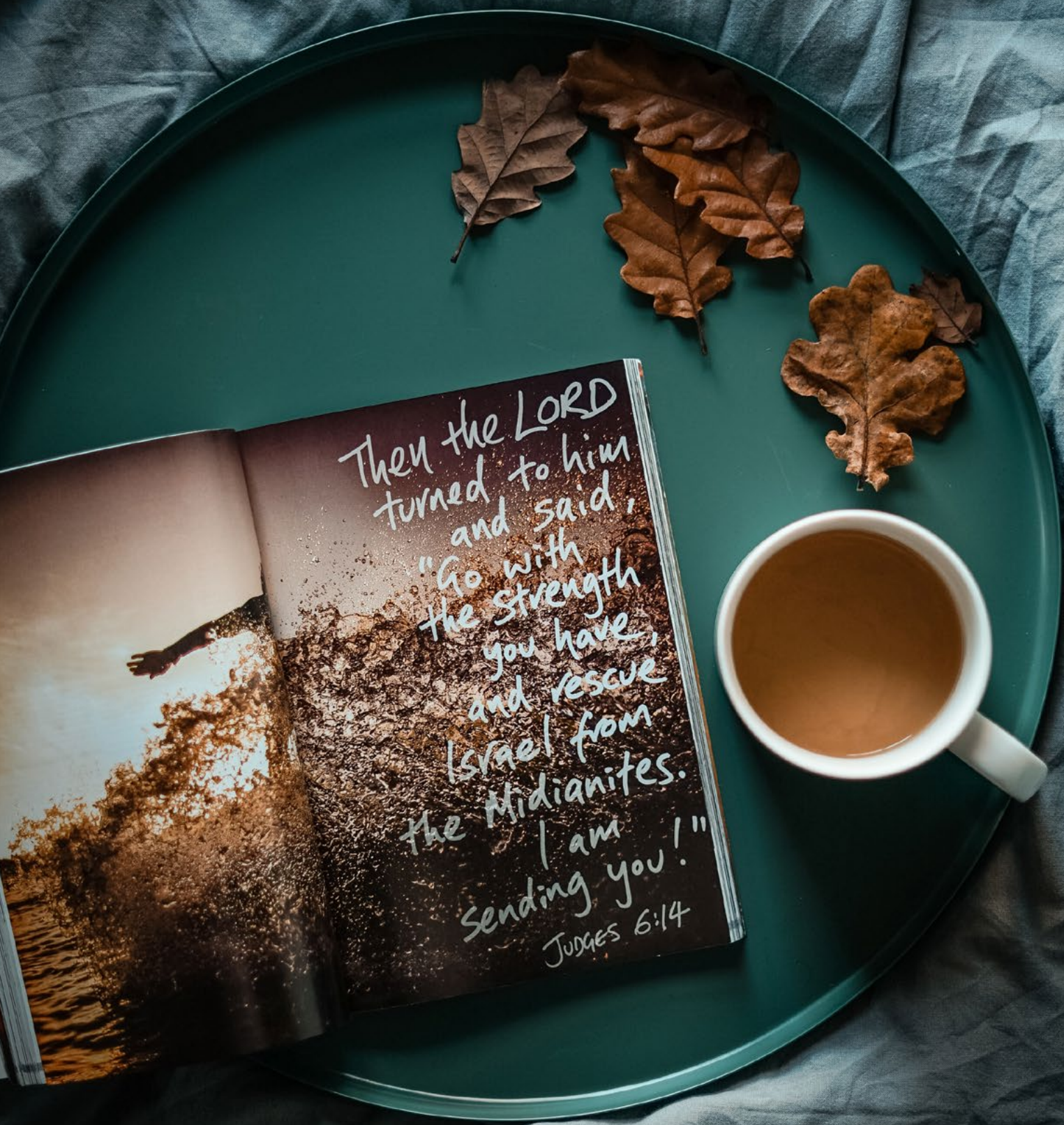




Caring for Your Parish Priest



Then the LORD
turned to him
and said,
"Go with
the strength
you have,
and rescue
Israel from
the Midianites.
I am
sending you!"
JUDGES 6:14

Caring For Your Parish Priest

Our Parish Priests are some of the hardest working members of the Church. They typically work every weekend and holiday, many of them live in the same building as their office, try to take two days off a week, oversee the work of multiple church centres, and, in the 21st century, take on more responsibilities and roles than ever before.

At different times, the Parish Priest is called upon to be a teacher, healer, judge, social worker, editor, philosopher, entertainer, salesperson, a compere at public functions, a 'tradie' for church building repairs, and they are supposed to be a scholar. They visit the sick, they marry people, they bury the dead, they comfort those who are sad, and reprimand those who fall into sin and through all this try to stay calm when faced with criticism. They plan programs, appoint committees, spend a considerable amount of time keeping the peace in congregations, they may be members of committees in the community and are often seen as community workers. Parish Priests are "on call" 24 hours a day, seven days a week often breaking away from their own families to help someone in the church through a difficult situation. In between all of this, they prepare sermons and preach them on Sundays and at midweek services. Then after the service, they smile through gritted teeth when someone says to them, "What a great job you have – you only have to work one day a week!"

Whether it is grief, anxiety, conflict or celebration, the work of the Parish Priest can be draining, and discouragement and depression often affects those who sacrifice their own life for the cause of the church.

There is very little information available about the physical, mental, and spiritual effects of ministry on the Parish Priest serving in Australia today, but surveys carried out in America and the United Kingdom by Global Parish Priests Network, Focus on the Family, The Schaeffer Institute, ExParish Priests.com, and Brokenrights.org, make several disturbing statistics:

- 85% of church leaders have considered leaving the ministry.
- 70% consider themselves lonely and do not have close personal friends, or anyone in whom to confide.
- 90% consider themselves overworked and report working between 55 to 75 hours per week.
- 70% feel grossly underpaid.
- 71% have experienced burnout.
- 86% feel unable to meet the demands of the job.
- 70% constantly fight depression and 65% wrestle with anxiety.
- 63% are so discouraged that they would leave the ministry if they could provide for their family without working at a church.
- 90% said the ministry was completely different than what they thought it would be like before they entered the ministry.
- 80% believe church pastoral ministry has negatively affected their families.
- 55% of church leaders or a family member experience serious conflict with a parishioner at least once a month
- 80% of spouses feel the Parish Priest is overworked and feel left out and under-appreciated by church members.
- 77% encountered marriage problems because of the pressures of ministry.
- And although this last statistic is not found in these studies, I know that it is true from the Bible: 100% of Parish Priests have a dangerous enemy who is absolutely determined to destroy them and the people they lead.

These statistics are sobering, and quite frankly frightening.



The Cost Of Not Caring

We tend to take all our needs to the priest, but who do priests take their needs to? We as their congregation are like their family. Just like members in a family, priests can sometimes be taken for granted, overworked and under-appreciated. The result is compassion fatigue, decreased performance, stress leave, physical and mental illness and troubled relationships. Divorce is common - as is early departure from the ministry. Some Parish Priests fall into temptation and yet others simply feel it's their time to call it quits

Moral failure among Parish Priests in the Australian church has happened with shocking frequency in the past and continues to happen today. When they fall into sin, it always wreaks havoc to the cause of Christ and the Church. Families suffer and marriages break down. The more visible and well-known the leader, the greater the harm. Divisions arise in the church between those who advocate tolerance and love toward the fallen leader and those labelled as unloving because they call for removal from public ministry. Furthermore, it leads to a mistrust of the church in the community. Consequently, almost everyone gets hurt in the process and it can take a church, and the community, many years to recover.

So the question for us, as brothers and sisters in Christ, is how do we help these men and women that God has called to lead us?

The following are some simple suggestions, by no means complete, with some practical ideas to help you, as a congregational member, to care for and support your Parish Priest.

*O Jesus, our great High Priest,
hear our humble prayers on behalf of our priests.
Give them a deep faith, a bright and firm hope
and a burning love which will ever increase in the course of their priestly life.
In their loneliness, comfort them.
In their sorrows, strengthen them.
In their frustrations, enlighten them.
Be their comfort, be their joy, and be their strength;
for your name's sake.
Amen.*

“Just like members in a family, priests can sometimes be taken for granted, overworked and under-appreciated. The result is compassion fatigue, decreased performance, stress leave, physical and mental illness and troubled relationships.”



1. Pray For Them

“Remember your leaders who taught you the word of God. Think of all the good that has come from their lives, and follow the example of their faith.” Hebrews 13:7

Parish Priests pray for the church, but who prays for them? Our Parish Priests are at the top of the hit list for Satan, our enemy. After all, they are entrusted with making decisions for the Church, teaching and preaching the Word of God, caring for the needs of our congregations, and working to bring salvation to the unsaved. They are the leadership of the church, and leaders are always the target in a battle. The Lord hears the prayers of people, and the Lord cares for the leaders of people; so remember to pray for your Parish Priest. Pray that God will bless them, their ministry, and your church. Pray for their emotional well-being, their physical strength, and their spiritual wellness. This is the most important thing you can do to help your parish. If you aren't already in the habit of doing this, now is a good time to start.

WHAT SHOULD I PRAY FOR MY PARISH PRIEST?

- **PRAY FOR THEIR PROTECTION** against temptations in the world. This is a high calling – to live above reproach – pray for the heart, character, and faithfulness of your Parish Priest. If Satan can bring them down, the work of a church will be hurt. So he will use all he can - greed, adultery, anger, addiction - to ruin their reputation. Pray for their protection so that they might set a good example to lead by.
- **PRAY FOR COURAGE** to keep living their vocation in the midst of a culture that is increasingly non-Christian. Pray for strength that they won't get tired and be able to keep hanging in there and doing the good work they are called to do.
- **PRAY FOR HOPE**, that they won't become discouraged when they may not be able to see the fruits of their labour and not always sure if they are making progress or not.
- **PRAY FOR WISDOM** in all of the different situations and people that priests are called to interact with. Pray for wisdom for them to lead your church and wisdom to serve the church. Pray that they will be led to do God's Will.
- **PRAY FOR INSPIRATION** that God would inspire them with godly vision and to bless them with gifts and abilities to lead the church and to grow the church spiritually and numerically.
- **PRAY FOR THEIR MINISTRY** as they prepare for services. Pray for them to have time to be alone with God and to study the word of God so that they are prepared when they stand in the pulpit. Pray that God will guide their heart and mind as they prepare the sermon and that God will speak to you through it.
- **PRAY FOR THEIR FAMILY.** Pray for their marriage and their spouse. Pray for their children. Ask your Parish Priests how you can be praying for them and their families.
- **PRAY WITH THEM.** Their hearts are as heavy as yours and there is great joy in knowing that the people of God are praying with them. They will appreciate your spiritual support. During difficult moments, they will know that your prayers are helping to sustain them.
- **PRAY FOR THEM IN CHURCH.** Remember to include prayers for your Parish Priest and their family in your weekly intercessions.
- **NOW, TAKE A MINUTE** to decide when you'll pray for them next. Put a reminder on your calendar if you have to. This is important!

2. Encourage Them

“And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.” Jeremiah 3:15

Being a Parish Priest is more than writing sermons and having coffee with people. It's doing funerals of toddlers; it's counselling adulterous couples; it's praying for a mother who was just diagnosed with breast cancer; it's working on cost-efficient building plans. Shepherding the people of God is hard work; it's a high calling for a reason. Anyone who has spent even a small amount of time doing it will tell you that being in full time ministry is one of the loneliest professions. The Parish Priest never feels that they are good enough at their work and no matter how much work they do, there is always more to be done. It is refreshing when church members talk about the impact that their ministry is having on their lives and what they are learning and how the Lord is growing them. It encourages their heart greatly.

HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE MY PARISH PRIEST?

- **TURN UP TO CHURCH.** Nothing will warm your Priest's heart than seeing the people of God turn up to the service that they have prepared and share in communion with you.
- **SAY THANK YOU!** Most clergy don't hear these words enough. So send them a card or say it personally. We live in a digital era where you can easily send a text or email saying thanks for who they are and what they do. Be specific when you thank them. They need to know that you were helped by something they said or did. It is an affirmation to them that they are accomplishing their purpose as a Priest.
- **TURN UP TO EVENTS.** Your Priest will take a lot of time and energy organising events to bring the church together and also for community outreach – so turn up! You have the ability to make it successful. Show up to things and focus on encouraging others – it's great to fellowship together!
- **GIVE FEEDBACK.** One of the Priest's main responsibilities is teaching the Word of God. On average, they may spend between 10–25 hours on sermon preparation. Give them feedback from their sermons. If you liked how they presented a point, or how the sermon impacted you then let them know. Negative feedback is good too as long as you do it in an encouraging and helpful manner. Choose your timing wisely, straight after the service is not the time. Wait a day or two and prayerfully consider how to respond.
- **BE A BETTER CHRISTIAN.** Let the sermon transform your life. Your Priest wants you to grow in your faith. They want to see new Christians joining the life of the church. There is great joy to a Priest when someone gets involved who has previously sat on the side-lines. A great way to show appreciation to them is to be excited about the things that they are excited about.
- **PROFESSIONAL SUPERVISION.** It is mandatory to their working contract with the Diocese that they have a professional supervisor. Support them in this and encourage them of its importance for their well-being.





3. Love Them

“But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labour among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.” 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

Being a Priest is a bit like being a parent. Work, vocation, passion and duty are all rolled into one. Like mums who get praised for a great Christmas dinner or dads for a great barbeque, but don't get applauded every time the laundry is folded, priests are recognized for the big events, but not always for the smaller things.

As you pray for your Priest to succeed in their work among you, pray they would succeed, first and foremost, in ministering to their own family. Few families face the kinds of pressures and expectations as the Priest's family. So in praying for them to succeed in ministry, start with their family. As God answers that prayer, they will be better qualified to minister to others.

HOW CAN I SHOW LOVE FOR THE PARISH PRIEST AND THEIR FAMILY?

- **RESPECT THEIR FAMILY TIME.** Occupational ministry is a family affair. Late nights, busy weekends, phone calls in the middle of the night - the demands of ministry affect more than just the one in the role. The Priest is not the only one who has a tough job - their family does, too! Respect their family time. Don't call during meal times and think twice before calling at the Rectory – is it really that important or can it wait?
- **MAKE SURE THEY TAKE THEIR REST.** Ensure your Priest takes the mandatory two days off a week and make sure that they take their full annual leave. These are Diocesan requirements for their well-being.
- **CARE FOR THEIR SPOUSE.** Let them know you appreciate them. Spouses are notoriously unsung in many churches. Many times it's expected that they will run things like children's church, music ministry, bible studies, regardless of whether or not that's their particular calling or passion. Don't automatically assume they will be involved in ministry. Don't bother them with unnecessary questions or complain about things to them. They are not the quick way to deliver a message! They may not know everything about what is happening in the church nor should they be expected too. From time to time, do something to say 'thankyou' to them for the work they do freely - something as simple as a card, or flowers, or biscuits.
- **DON'T FORGET THE KIDS!** Having a Priest for a parent is no easy thing. You've got to listen to them use you in sermon illustrations, and you've always got people expecting you to be on perfect behaviour. Show an interest in them, but don't pry into their life or pressure their involvement throughout the church. Respect their privacy.
- **LOOK AFTER THEM.** Last, but not least, after the church service, at refreshments, don't forget to make sure they are presented with morning tea too!

“As you pray for your Priest to succeed in their work among you, pray they would succeed, first and foremost, in ministering to their own family.”



4. Support Them

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do it with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” Hebrews 13:17

Being a leader of a local church is one of the hardest and most complicated jobs in the world. It requires extraordinary leadership, a deft hand at playing politics (every church has them), and a tender heart. No Parish Priest can do it alone. They need help. Your help. The following are some simple ways that you can support them, but it is by no means comprehensive. Far from it. Anything you can do to let them know that they are not alone, and can rely on you is helpful indeed.

HOW CAN I SUPPORT MY PARISH PRIEST?

- **BE LOYAL TO THEM.** The best encouragement that a Parish Priest can receive is the gift of their people's loyalty. If they are a person of integrity, who love Jesus, who is committed to God's Word, and who faithfully cares for your church, stick with them. Parish Priests need people to help them through the good times as well as the tough times. They need you. Encourage your Parish Priest by being loyal to them.
- **SPEAK HIGHLY OF THEM.** Out of the entire list, this is probably the most significant means of encouragement. Parish Priests face a barrage of criticism. Be an outspoken defender of your Parish Priest. The Bible prohibits unkind speech, let alone unkind speech directed at them. Speak highly of your Priest before your family, their family, and before others in your church.
- **DON'T GOSSIP ABOUT THEM** or allow others too as this causes a lot of harm within the church body. Gently confront parishioners who spread rumours, and make it clear that criticizing a priest behind their back never solves a problem. If there is a legitimate complaint, offer to go with them to talk to the Priest. When difficulties arise, do your Priest the courtesy of making an appointment so you can talk about it with them in person.
- **ALLOW THEM TO CORRECT YOU.** It is their job after all! *Proverbs 27:6* says, "Wounds from a friend can be trusted." No one likes confrontation. But, if they are wanting to fulfil their calling, they must do it anyway. If and when they approach you with love, kindness, and genuine concern for you, please listen. They are there to help you and to protect you from harm and ultimately offer spiritual direction.
- **COME WITH SOLUTIONS.** Parish Priests get lots of parishioners bringing suggestions of ways to build the parish and their faith and this can be overwhelming. But if you come and say 'here's my suggestion and this is how I can help you make it happen,' that really helps to open up a priest's mind and heart to the possibility – work as a team!
- **DON'T DO BUSINESS BEFORE OR AFTER CHURCH.** Let worship be the Parish Priest's focus on Sundays, especially before the service begins. Preaching and leading in worship require an enormous amount of physical, emotional, and spiritual energy.
- **IF YOU HAVE SERIOUS CONCERNS** regarding the behaviour of your Parish Priest, it is essential that you speak with someone. Please phone Professional Standards on 1800 774 945. Or you can write to the Director of Professional Standards directly at:

Anglican Diocese of Newcastle
PO Box 494
Newcastle
NSW, 2300

Or email: dps@newcastleanglican.org.au



5. Free Them

“Brothers and sisters, choose seven from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” Acts 6:3-4

Don't expect your Parish Priests to do everything. (Yes, even YOU can share your faith!) One of their roles is to equip YOU for ministry. Before you ask them to do something, ask yourself, “Is there something God is calling me to do?” Discuss it with them. Free your Parish Priest so that they can have their time to minister the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

HOW CAN I SUPPORT MY PARISH PRIEST?

- **START BY ASKING** your leaders where they need help. Let them know you are interested in getting involved.
- **SERVE!** How many volunteers does it take to run a church? No one knows, because no church has ever had enough. A typical church reports that 90% of the work is done by 10% of the people. Looking for volunteers to meet the many needs of a growing church takes up heaps of time. Call and ask them what projects could use a helping hand? Get involved, cheerfully sharing the load of the ministry.
- **USE YOUR GIFTS.** *Romans 11:29* says, “For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable,” they are also non-transferrable. They are ‘your’ gifts and callings, not the Priest’s. But when you don’t do your job, they have to try to pick up the slack. So use your gifts, whatever it is that you have been gifted to do, talk about it with the Parish Priest and then make a commitment to doing it.
- **USE YOUR SKILLS.** If you have the skills, help with church repair or office work. Maybe you could fold bulletins, address letters, or run errands for the office manager. Churches often make do with old copiers and computers, - so if you know how to fix things, lend a hand!
- **GET ADDITIONAL HELP.** Sometimes the duties of a church can become too much for a single leader to handle. If your church is financially able, consider paying for an additional paid staff member. The Diocesan CEY Ministries financially supports family workers. More details are available on the Diocesan website: newcastleanglican.org.au
- **RAISE YOUR HAND!** There are many ways to serve in the church and all you need to do is raise your hand. Ask where help is needed and be willing to be a faithful servant.

Before you ask them to do
something, ask yourself, “Is there
something God is calling me to do?”

6. Celebrate Them

Dear brothers and sisters, honour those who are your leaders in the Lord's work. They work hard among you and give you spiritual guidance. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

When was the last time you told your Parish Priest that you appreciate all the hard work and service that they have given to the parish? They work tirelessly every week not only preparing to preach God's word, but also shepherding the people God has entrusted to them. Your Parish Priest gives above and beyond in their care, support and love for you. When you acknowledge that, they will feel appreciated by you, and loved by their church, and you will get the best out of them.

HOW CAN I CELEBRATE MY PARISH PRIEST?

- CELEBRATE THEIR ANNIVERSARY of their installation/licensing to the parish. Host a special meal, parish lunch or picnic. The ways to make such an event memorable are endless: Highlight significant moments in the life of the church under the Parish Priest's leadership - let your creativity shine!
- APPRECIATION VIDEO – Create a presentation of photos and video of the Priest in action during the past year. Make a video of parishioners and people in the community giving one reason why they appreciate their Parish Priest? Set it to music and play it as a pre-service video.
- ACKNOWLEDGE THEM. Once in a while, take a few minutes for someone in the congregation to give an official “thanks” at the end of a service. Give them the recognition they deserve. Make sure to thank their spouse and family too!
- A TRIBUTE or thank-you letter in your church newsletter, bulletin or magazine about how thankful you are for your Parish Priest is a nice gesture, as well.
- GET CHILDREN INVOLVED. Get your children's ministry to make a card or a poster to present to them during the service.
- CELEBRATE THEIR SPECIAL DAYS. Parishioners expect their priest to remember their birthdays but do you know when your Priest's birthday is? Celebrate their birthday, wedding anniversary, etc. A simple recognition will go a long way!

When was the last time you told your
Parish Priest that you appreciate all
the hard work and service that they
have given to the parish?





Conclusion

Ministry is stressful, and burnout is a constant danger. The people who run your parish need your prayers, your help, and reminders of your love and appreciation. They say, “A happy wife – a happy life! My experience is, “A happy priest – a happy parish!” When a priest feels supported, appreciated, and encouraged, they are far better able to live their vocations with authenticity and fervour. As Catholic Archbishop of Portland, John Vlazny once wrote, “We priests are only human. The more welcome and supported we feel, the more effective we will be in carrying out our ministry.”

Finally, remember that Jesus makes Himself present to us in a special way through His priests so whatever you do for your priest, you also do for the Lord, and whatever you do for the Lord helps to build the Kingdom of God right here in the Diocese of Newcastle. May God bless you!

A PRAYER FOR YOUR PARISH PRIEST

*Gracious and loving God,
we thank you for the gift of our priest.
Help our priest to be strong in their vocation.
Set their soul on fire with love for your people.
Grant them the wisdom, understanding, and
strength they need to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.
Inspire them with the vision of your Kingdom.
Give them the words they need to spread the Gospel.
Allow them to experience joy in their ministry.
Help them to become instruments of your divine grace.
We ask this through Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns as our Eternal Priest.
Amen.*

