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First Sunday of Lent

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts. (Psalm 95:7-8)

As we begin this holy, penitential Season of Lent, I am filled with profound gratitude for the prayerful support and filial care that you have shown me during the past five months that I have been blessed to serve as your Shepherd. For fifty-six years, the Diocese of Allentown has been my loving home. You have nurtured the roots of my faith, witnessed to me the virtues of the Gospel, encouraged me in my relationship with Christ, generously assisted in my discernment to the Priesthood, lovingly welcomed me as a priest, and have warmly embraced me as the Fifth Bishop of the Diocese of Allentown. Each of you has, in God's mysterious plan, contributed to the joy that I have found for the past thirty years as a priest of Jesus Christ.

Since my Ordination and Installation as Bishop, I have been privileged to meet and pray with so many of you in our five counties. I have been renewed by your zeal for the Gospel, awed by the depth of your faith, and filled with immense hope for the future.

If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts. This popular Lenten psalm speaks of the joy that comes from hearing God's voice and following it wholeheartedly in one's life. It speaks of the same generosity that I have witnessed in each of you. The psalm expresses that with God at the center of one's life, one will never go astray.

I write to you today, humbly asking for your assistance in the important work of fostering a culture of vocations in the Diocese of Allentown. My brother priests and I have been enriched from the support of this local Church in my own life and know that this generosity of spirit is still alive today in you.

The Season of Lent is an appropriate time to offer our prayers, fasting, and almsgiving for this singular purpose: that God will abundantly bless the flock of the Diocese with courageous, faithful, and humble men to serve as priests. In light of the declining number of active priests, we are all painfully aware of our great need. I kindly ask you to join me during this Sacred Season in offering our Lenten prayers, fasting, and almsgiving for an increase of vocations to the Priesthood and Religious Life; vocations that are fostered, nourished, sustained, and centered in the divine gift of the Most Holy Eucharist.

To my brother priests: Thank you for your ministry to the souls entrusted to your care. I encourage you to be joyful models of the Priesthood in your local communities. Recall that certain priest who inspired your vocation as a young man and imitate the mysteries that you celebrate in the Sacrifice of the Mass. Because of your love for the priesthood I ask that, during this Season of Lent, you will consider inviting young man to follow in your footsteps.

To my dedicated deacons: I appreciate your faithful witness, proclamation of the Good News, and support of your local pastors. Continue to live your vocation of service to the people of God with charity and humility so that families will be inspired by the graces that flow from the sacrament of Holy Orders.

To our religious women and men: I express gratitude for your generous example of the evangelical counsels of your Religious Community in the sacrifice of laying down your life for the Gospel. Draw closer to these charisms so that the radiance of your life shines brightly for those men and women considering the Consecrated Life.

To our dear seminarians: Your courageous 'yes' in the midst of the noises of this busy world stands as a refreshing sign of hope for our Church. Know of our prayers for your formation. Allow yourself to be drawn closer to Christ, so that you may love as He loves. Never cease to inspire your peers to this sacrificial calling.

To our parents and families: Fostering a culture of vocations is the work of every parishioner, teacher, catechist, and coach throughout our Diocese. Be willing to encourage and support a vocation to the Priesthood even from among your own family. God will richly bless your family for such generosity.

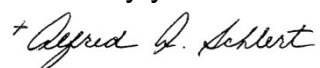
To our enthusiastic young people: Thank you for your creativity, your honesty, and your witness to Christ. Your youthfulness and hope make you ready to embrace a life of holiness and authentic living that only the Church can offer in a confused world. Be not afraid to open your hearts to a vocation to the Priesthood and Consecrated Life in the Diocese of Allentown.

To the sick, the infirmed, and the homebound: Your steadfast perseverance amidst the challenges of life stands as a testament to your faith. Never underestimate the power of your suffering and loneliness, your daily recitation of the Rosary, and the Stations of the Cross for an increase of vocations.

It is my Lenten hope and prayer that the same witness, encouragement, and guidance of the Holy Spirit that I and so many of our dedicated priests experienced as young men, will rekindle in our local Church an increase of vocations: zealous and holy priests that will follow the mandate of Christ *to feed my sheep*.

Invoking the intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church, our Diocesan Patroness, and Saint John Vianney, Universal Patron of all Priests, be assured of my gratitude and continued prayers for you and your family for a blessed and holy Season of Lent, as I am

Sincerely yours in Christ,



Most Reverend Alfred A. Schlert
Bishop of Allentown