



VOCATIONS NEWS

WELCOME to our first newsletter from the Diocesan Vocations Office!

Based in the grounds of our diocesan seminary – Saint Mary’s College, Oscott – we work to promote and nurture a culture of Vocations throughout the Archdiocese of Birmingham. We work alongside parishes, schools and chaplaincies to enable individuals to explore their personal call to holiness. Since beginning this role in 2021, I have been looking for a way to share some of our news with you.

My primary role, as the Diocesan Director of Vocation, is to accompany men who are discerning whether they are called to priesthood. Whilst some may think that men are no longer being called to be priests, the reality is quite different! God is still calling, and people are still responding to His invitation to “come and see”. We regularly hold Discernment Weekends, and in April this year, we hosted our first Young Discerners Group for those under eighteen.

As we celebrate Vocations Sunday, it is also a good opportunity to provide a financial statement for the Clergy Training Fund. The principal purpose of the Clergy Training Fund is to support the formation of the future priests and permanent deacons for our Archdiocese. This fund relies on your generosity. Thank you to the many parishioners who give regularly. On the Fourth Sunday of Easter – Vocations Sunday – we hold our annual collection in every parish. This contributes directly to the future of our Archdiocese. Thank you in advance for your continued support!

Please continue to pray for our work, and for an increase in vocations in our Archdiocese. We ask God to grant people the courage to respond to His invitation to follow Him.

With my prayers as we celebrate the Season of Easter.

God bless,

Fr Craig

Rev. Fr. Craig Szmidt
 Diocesan Director of Vocation

PLEASE PRAY FOR VOCATIONS



DIOCESAN PRAYER FOR VOCATIONS

**Heavenly Father,
 we ask you to send labourers
 into your harvest.**

**Inspire, in the hearts of your people,
 vocations to the priesthood, diaconate
 and religious life.**

**Bless our families with a spirit of generosity,
 so that those whom you call
 have the courage to give themselves
 to your Church in faith.**

Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

2025



ORDINATIONS IN 2024



Last July saw a week of ordinations for the Archdiocese of Birmingham at St. Chad's Cathedral!

On Sunday 14th, Andrej Rusnak, Tony Hartley and Andrew Foster were ordained to the permanent diaconate for the Archdiocese of Birmingham (*left*). On Tuesday 16th, there was the joyful Episcopal Ordination of Bishop Richard Walker and Bishop Timothy Menezes. And on Saturday 20th, we celebrated the Presbyteral Ordination of Fr. David Bench (*right*).



In December, Gerard Bowen was ordained to the diaconate in the chapel of our diocesan seminary, St. Mary's College, Oscott, at the end of his initial formation. He is now in ministry at Blessed Carlo Acutis Parish, Wolverhampton, as part of his Vocational Synthesis period in preparation for priestly ordination. You can read a little of Deacon Gerry's story later in this newsletter.

MEET THE TEAM...

KATHRYN BAYLISS – Personal Assistant to the Diocesan Director of Vocation

In my role as Personal Assistant to the Director of Vocation, I am employed by the Archdiocese to work three days a week.

My main administrative duties cover all information relating to enquirers, discerners (such as booking discernment weekends), planning the Selection Panel for those making a formal application to the priesthood by gathering required documentation from and about candidates, and general day-to-day office duties. I am also the contact for the Clergy Training Fund (CTF), and administer the Gift Aid for the CTF.

As the Director of Vocation is also our Diocesan Director for the Guild of Saint Stephen for altar servers, I therefore also administer the Guild in our diocese by processing orders of medals and other goods for parishes. I also generate certificates marking anniversaries of parish affiliation to the Guild.



DEACON OWEN GRESTY – Diocesan Promoter for Vocations

My role is to help in nurturing a culture of vocations across the Archdiocese of Birmingham. I offer support to our parishes, schools and university chaplaincies by being a point of contact, making visits and providing resources.

I work with Fr. Craig in making opportunities for people to ask, "Is God calling me to this?"- as a priest, a deacon or in the consecrated life, or whether that call is to marriage or a single life. This may be through events, such as our Young Discerners Group or through supporting parishes by preaching about God's call to holiness. I am responsible for the design of all the printed materials promoting vocations across the Archdiocese – such as posters to raise awareness, cards to encourage prayer and resources for those discerning the priesthood.

My role also includes supporting altar servers by representing the Archdiocese of Birmingham on the Central Council of the Archconfraternity of Saint Stephen. As part of my work for the diocese, I am also Administrator for Ongoing Formation for Clergy.





Throughout the year, we engage in a wide variety of vocation promotion work, often alongside others in the Archdiocese and beyond.

In 2024, we were involved in **Invocation @ Adoremus** - a day for those discerning their vocation, as part of the National Eucharistic Congress. We supported St. Mary's College, Oscott by welcoming 630 primary school children to visit and explore seminary life as part of the **Schools' Outreach Programme**. We supported the Office for Mission with the **Annual Thanksgiving Mass for Marriage**.

We present to you a few more detailed snapshots of what our work has involved.

ENCOURAGING OUR ALTAR SERVERS



Called to Serve, the Archdiocese of Birmingham's first ever Guild of Saint Stephen altar servers' retreat, was held 8th-10th March 2024. Over 100 young people (aged 9-18), with their parish adult leaders - representing 26 parishes - gathered at Alton Castle and Soli to share prayer, worship, workshops and fun activities together.

The weekend was led by Fr. Craig and Dcn. Owen from the Diocesan Vocations Office, together with the Kenelm Youth Trust - the first such collaboration between the two departments of the Archdiocese. We were joined by various guests: inspirational US speaker Jimmy Mitchell for talks and lay and religious speakers on our Vocations Panel. We welcomed Bishop David Evans to celebrate Holy Mass on Lætare Sunday.

A highlight of the weekend was a candlelit Blessed Sacrament Procession, during which Fr. Chris Yule, Spiritual Director to KYT, gave Benediction over the village of Alton. Particularly memorable was 140 people praying in beautiful, calm silence before the Lord, as well as praising Him with their voices in song!

The **Annual Guild of St. Stephen Mass of Thanksgiving** continues to take place each first Saturday in October at St. Chad's Cathedral. On Saturday 5th October 2024, Holy Mass was celebrated by His Grace, The Archbishop. It was heartening to see a return to pre-COVID numbers, with the the Cathedral filled to capacity with altar servers of all ages. We give thanks for the dedicated service given both to their parishes and to God.

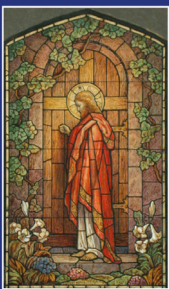
SCHOOLS CAREERS FAYRES

Dcn. Owen regularly attends careers events in our diocesan secondary schools, in order to be present alongside employers, universities and colleges, and volunteering opportunities. This is a great chance to have conversations with young people whilst they are considering their future, in order to chat about where God might be calling them.

We set up an engaging stand with our ever-popular cut-outs and materials for students to take away. Feedback from schools and - more importantly - young people tells us the presence of the Vocations Office is valued at these events.



A PRAYER FOR MY OWN VOCATION A PRAYER FOR OUR YOUNG PEOPLE



For many years, the Vocations Office has produced prayer cards for parishes, schools, groups and individuals across our Archdiocese. These have usually been to pray for the vocations of others, such as the Diocesan Prayer for Vocations and our ever-popular Rosary for Vocations. Following feedback, we wrote a prayer and produced a card entitled **A Prayer for My Own Vocation**. This is particularly aimed at young people, but suitable for anyone praying for *themselves* and discerning where God may be calling. It has been so well-received by young people that we had to have a second print run.

Copies are available free-of-charge by contacting us.



We accompany men along the entire journey of discerning priesthood: from initial enquiry, formal discernment and application, through to seminary formation and ministry as a deacon in a parish prior to priestly ordination. Here are some stories of men whose discernment your prayers and donations are helping to support.

A DISCERNER'S STORY

"Discerning the priesthood is not easy and can feel lonely at times, as you can feel like you are the only person discerning, because you don't know others who are. But if you are truly feeling like God is calling you to the priesthood, that feeling will not go away until you take a leap of faith. Contact the Vocations Office and go on a discernment weekend and find out for yourself.

I had been discerning for quite a while and felt trapped in an endless cycle of this calling feeling strong and clear, then feeling weak and doubtful. It got to a point where I stopped praying to know if God was calling me to be a priest and instead prayed to God simply for peace.

Then I accepted the invitation to go on a discernment weekend. I remember walking up the driveway to Oscott thinking, "What am I doing going to a seminary?" I was feeling a mixture of fear, excitement and anticipation – so much so that I couldn't go straight to the main entrance, but went to Our Lady's statue outside to pray and compose myself.

But in contrast, only a couple of hours later, I couldn't understand what I was afraid of. Everyone was friendly and I was so comfortable around the other discerners that I was opening up more to them about myself and my discernment than I had to my best friends that I have known for many years.

You learn so much about seminary life and about yourself too. You will get the chance to speak to other discerners, seminarians, and priests and to listen to other people's experiences. I found it answered many questions. The personal highlight for me was the prayer life at Oscott. The experience I found has deepened my own prayer, which has stayed with me since.

I was praying on the last night, and I realised that I had finally found the peace I had been praying so long for. I now have a much clearer view on where I am heading in my discernment journey and am looking forward to my next discernment weekend. I also have kept in touch with and have met up with other discerners since, which really helps. It no longer feels like I am the only one discerning a calling to the priesthood.

So if you are thinking of the priesthood, just remember that you owe it to God and to yourself to discern it. You are not alone and will be supported all the way."

Mark



BEGINNING FORMATION IN 2025

"I first got the sense of a calling to the priesthood in 2018, although other people saw it before I did. People used to ask me whether I had ever considered priesthood and encouraged me to pray about it. I think it's really important that people carry on doing this. If you get a feeling about someone, tell them! Pray for them! Sometimes people need someone to plant that seed!

Although the process of applying can be stressful at times, there was plenty of time, and great support to help you through it. I'm really looking forward to starting in Valladolid and thank everyone for their prayers and words of encouragement. Please continue to keep all of our seminarians in your prayers."

Luke Jarvis

Luke is pictured with Archbishop Bernard and Fr. Craig.



IN GRATITUDE FOR YOUR SUPPORT

“After nearly seven years of seminary formation in Valladolid and St. Mary’s College, Oscott, I am now in the final phase of my preparation for ordination to the priesthood.

With a profound sense of gratitude, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to all the People of God, particularly those within our Archdiocese, for their unwavering support and assistance. I am deeply indebted to those who have offered prayers and generously contributed to the Clergy Training Fund. Should all proceed as planned, I eagerly anticipate dedicating the remainder of my life to serving the People of God within our Archdiocese by ministering the Sacraments.”

Dcn. Gerry Bowen

The Archdiocese of Birmingham has had a great tradition of **Deanery Vocations Groups** - teams made up of clergy, religious and lay faithful, who help in the work of promoting vocations on a local level.

Our North Staffordshire Vocations Promotions Group was started in 1988 and still meets regularly after 37 years! The recent reorganisation of our deaneries and the Deanery Vocations Months initiative (see the back page) have created opportunities for new groups to begin, such as the Dudley and Wolverhampton Group. Perhaps you could be involved in forming or supporting such a group in your deanery?

PROMOTING VOCATIONS LOCALLY

The Dudley and Wolverhampton Deanery Vocations Group is a team of priests, deacons, religious sisters, and lay faithful working together to foster a culture of vocation across the Deanery. February is designated as our Deanery Vocations Month in the Archdiocese, and our group meets regularly to pray and plan activities well in advance.

Recognising the essential role of prayer in nurturing new vocations, we created a WhatsApp prayer group where members and interested parishioners can contribute prayers at their convenience and record their participation. Together, we’ve prayed Rosaries, Memorares, and Pope Francis’ Prayer for Vocations, among others.

To keep this spirit of prayer alive throughout the year, we are circulating a statue of Christ the King to every parish in the Deanery. It remains in each church for two weeks, accompanied by a framed prayer and prayer cards, becoming a focal point for communal and personal prayer for vocations.

In February 2025, we organised a Deanery Vocations Mass for schools, attended by around 250 children. Following Holy Mass, children heard short talks from individuals living out different vocations – priesthood, diaconate, religious life, marriage, and celibacy – and engaged in a lively Q&A.

We also hosted a Youth Prayer Vigil themed “Happiness is looking towards God,” inspired by Blessed Carlo Acutis. The Church of Saints Peter & Paul was transformed with candlelight, music, reflections and a striking image of the Holy Face of Christ to create a deeply prayerful atmosphere. (See the image on the right.)

Looking ahead, we aim to encourage spiritual reading among young people, exploring both chaplaincy resources in schools and online tools.

Winner Varghese
Chairman of the Dudley & Wolverhampton Vocations Group





CLERGY TRAINING FUND ACCOUNTS

INCOME	2024	2023	2022
Income from Donations			
CTF Donations (non-Gift Aid)	£8,263	£7,501	£12,704
CTF Donations (Gift Aid)	£4,592	£2,944	£6,696
CTF Standing Orders (non-Gift Aid)	£10,003	£10,784	£11,704
CTF Standing Orders (Gift Aid)	£37,251	£35,835	£35,942
Vocations Sunday Collection	£46,245	£48,080	£24,434
General Donations	£18,069	£15,038	£11,506
Binations (Priests)	£2,525	£2,681	£2,616
SUBTOTAL	£126,948	£122,862	£105,601
Income from Other Sources			
External Grants	£0	£0	£64,000
Bank Interest	£1,067	£1,328	£0
Gift Aid Reclaimed	£10,468	£20,005*	£0*
Rental Income (inc. Sale of Property)	£108,139	£1,729	£0
Vocations Promotion (e.g. Donations from Schools)	£0	£395	£330
Legacies	£34,204	£41,800	£142,495
Diocesan Grant	£200,000	£280,000	£300,000
SUBTOTAL	£353,877	£345,257	£506,825
TOTAL	£480,825	£468,119	£612,426

*2022's Gift Aid Reclaim was paid into the CTF in 2023

EXPENDITURE	2024	2023	2022
Formation			
Seminarists (incl. Grants & Seminary Fees)	£248,229	£189,060	£260,172
Permanent Diaconate Fees (Seminary Fees)	£39,825	£105,733	£53,868
Clergy Undertaking Further Studies	£6,640	£14,922	£5,289
Priestly Discernment Costs (incl. Application Costs)	£7,302	£900	£4,458
Propaedeutic Year for Diaconate Costs (Incl. Application Costs)	£32,725	£5,040	£22,680
SUBTOTAL	£334,720	£315,654	£346,467
Diocesan Vocations Office			
Vocations Promotion Costs (incl. Printing & Postage)	£4,112	£10,083	£9,451
Personnel Costs (incl. Salaries, Mileage, Training etc.)	£70,781	£68,021	£111,253
Office Expenses	£10,252	£10,679	£16,689
Rent for Vocations Office	£15,178	£13,146	£13,706
Vocation Director Accommodation Costs (rent, utilities etc)	£16,081	£19,648	£14,614
Bank Charges	£962	£573	£924
Exceptional Expenses	£0	£2,648	£0
SUBTOTAL	£117,367	£124,835	£166,636
	£452,087	£440,489	£513,103

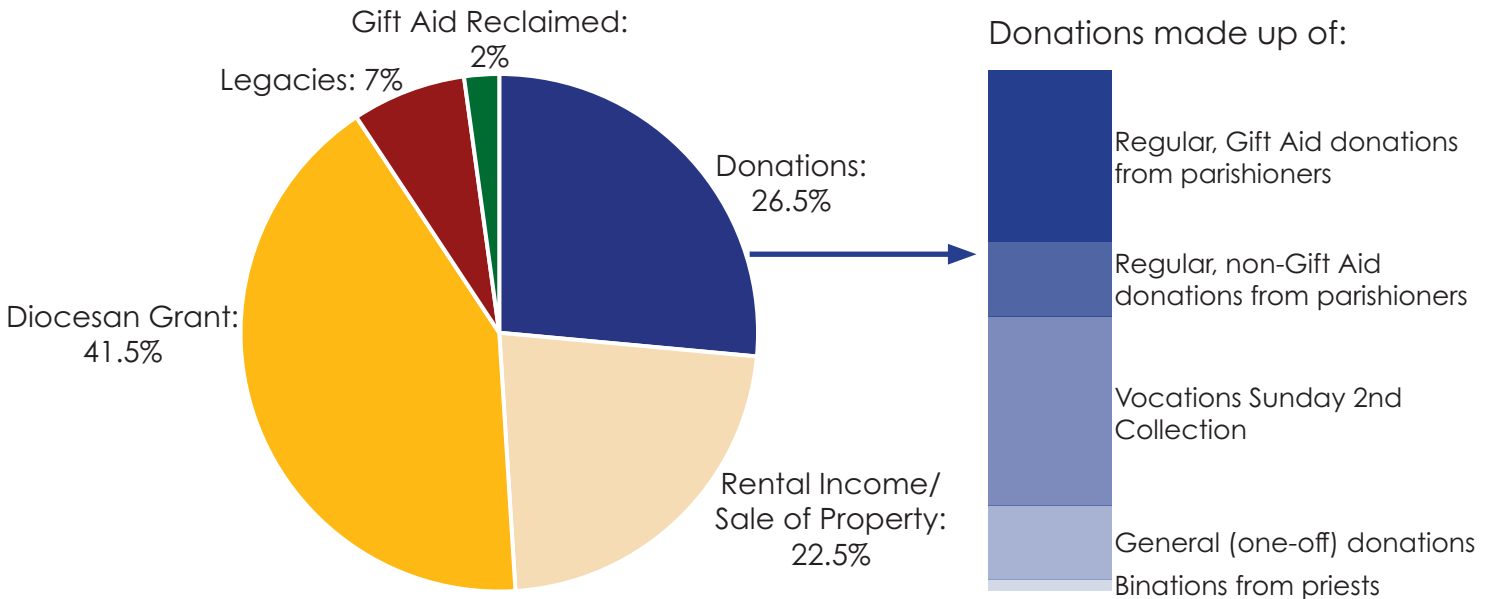
TOTAL SURPLUS/DEFICIT PER YEAR	£28,738	£27,630	£99,323
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To support us: www.vocations.org.uk/ctf

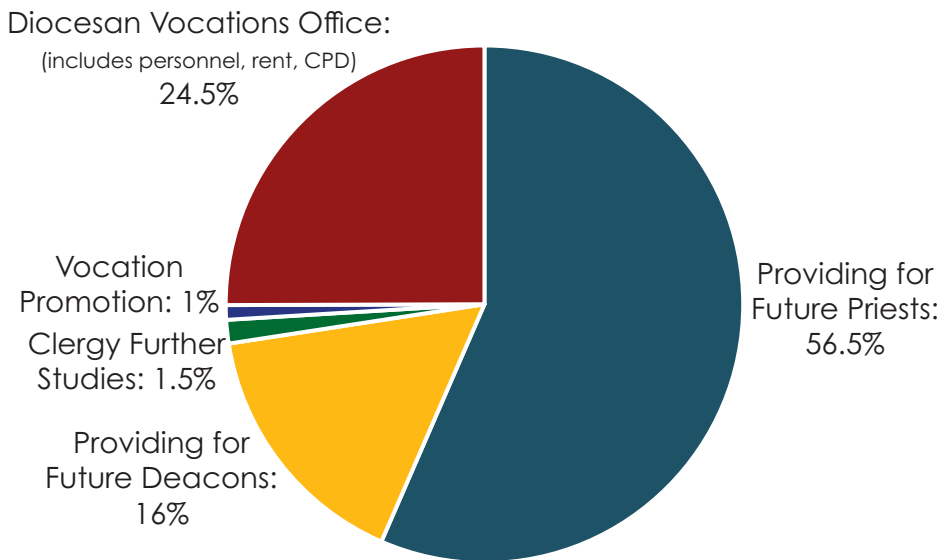




INCOME: Where Our Money Came From in 2024



EXPENDITURE: How We Spent This Money in 2024



We supported:



N.B.: Figures do not total 100% due to rounding.

The **Clergy Training Fund** exists to pay for the formation of the future priests and permanent deacons for the Archdiocese of Birmingham.

It costs approximately **£200,000 over seven years** of formation for one new priest (£25,000 - £30,000 per seminarian each year). This is a substantial amount of money, but it is essential because it covers seminary fees, living costs, travel and study materials.

We rely solely on your generosity. Anything you can give - whether big or small - will help to provide future priests and deacons for our parishes.

How you can give:

- Standing Order
- Regular giving or one-off donations
- Online by credit or debit card
- Legacies



DEANERY VOCATIONS MONTHS 2025

JANUARY: *Month of the Most Holy Name of Jesus*

Pray for the courage to serve the Lord in whatever ways He calls you during the coming year.

FEBRUARY: *Month of the Holy Family*

- **DUDLEY & WOLVERHAMPTON**
- **OXFORD (SOUTH)**

MARCH: *Month of Saint Joseph*

- **BANBURY & WARWICK**

APRIL: *Month of the Holy Eucharist*

This Lent and Easter, pray that the Lord sends more labourers into His harvest.

MAY: *Month of the Blessed Virgin Mary*

- **BIRMINGHAM CATHEDRAL & SOUTH**

JUNE: *Month of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*

- **COVENTRY & NUNEATON**

JULY: *Month of the Precious Blood*

- **LICHFIELD & WALSALL**
- **OXFORD (NORTH)**

AUGUST: *Month of the Immaculate Heart of Mary*

Through the intercession of Our Lady, pray for the priests of our Archdiocese.

SEPTEMBER: *Month of the Seven Sorrows of Mary*

- **BIRMINGHAM EAST & NORTH**

OCTOBER: *Month of the Holy Rosary*

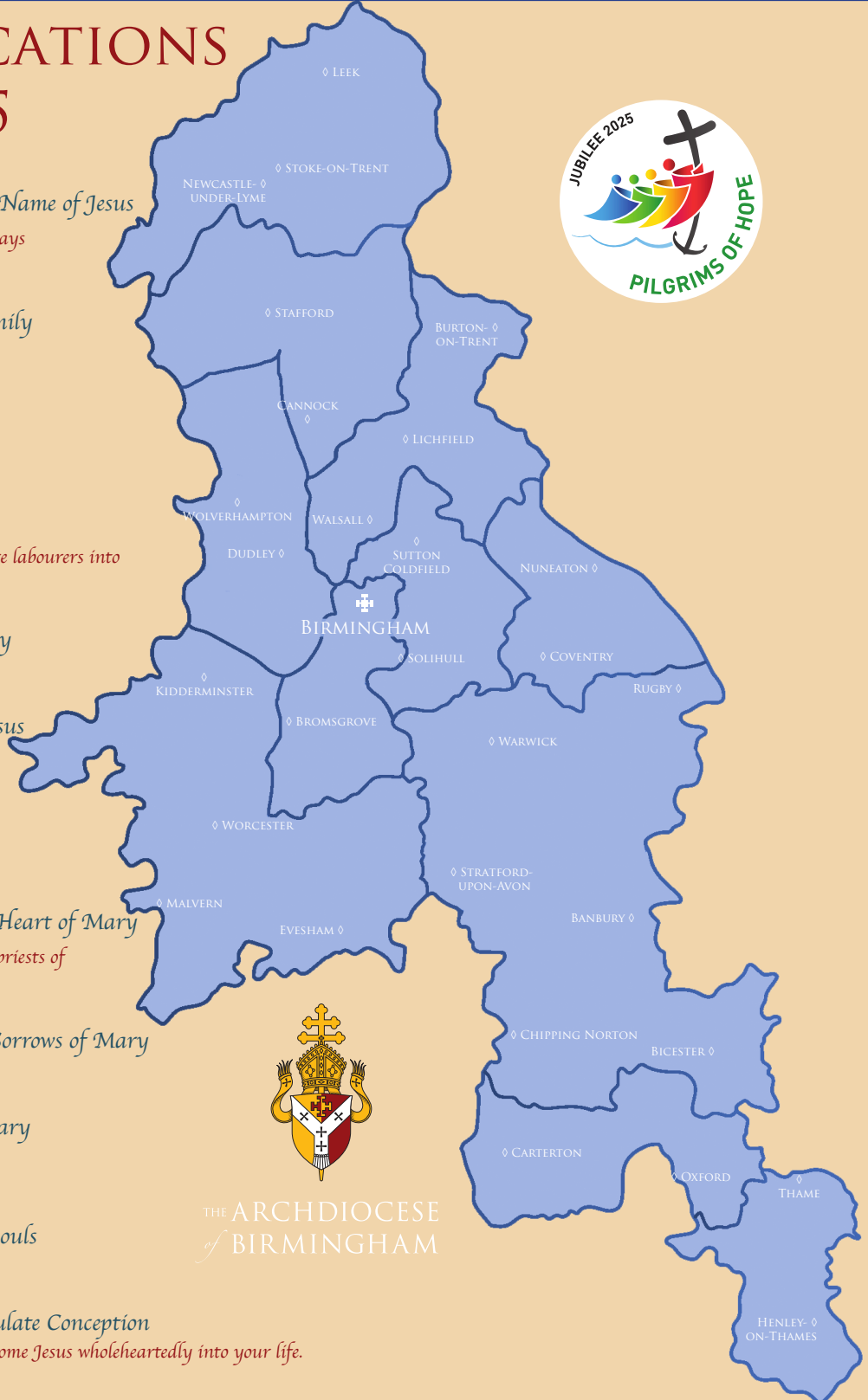
- **NORTH STAFFORDSHIRE**
- **STAFFORD**

NOVEMBER: *Month of the Holy Souls*

- **KIDDERMINSTER & WORCESTER**

DECEMBER: *Month of the Immaculate Conception*

This Advent and Christmas, pray that you will welcome Jesus wholeheartedly into your life.



THE ARCHDIOCESE
of BIRMINGHAM

DIOCESAN VOCATIONS OFFICE
 St. Mary's College, Oscott
 Chester Road
 Sutton Coldfield
 B73 5AA

To discuss a vocation to the priesthood:
Fr. Craig: 0121 321 5142

For general enquiries, the Clergy Training Fund
 and the Guild of Saint Stephen:
Kathryn: 0121 321 5144

For vocation promotion:
Dcn. Owen: 0121 321 5135