



PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP  
 appointed to be read  
 in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth  
 on 16<sup>th</sup> October 2022, the Twenty-Ninth Sunday of the Year.

### THE FUTURE OF THE DIOCESE

Dear All,

I am writing to you about the future of the Catholic Church.

The Church is a Divine Mystery. As we affirm in the Creed: "I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church."<sup>1</sup> The Church is founded on Jesus Christ and led by the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> She is the Bride of Christ, and Jesus promised He would be with Her until the end of time.<sup>3</sup> But the Church is human as well as Divine. Christ is the Head but the Body is formed of people like you and me, human beings capable of greatness but also fallible, prone to error and sin. Whilst Jesus gave the gift of infallibility to His Church, that she would never err in her teachings on faith and morals,<sup>4</sup> He never promised the Church would always last in any particular place. Look at North Africa. Once, this was the land of St. Cyprian, St. Augustine and many of the great Fathers of the Church, a land where important synods and councils assembled to defend the true faith. Today, there is nothing left. This is why I am writing to you about the future of the Catholic Church, at least the future of this Church in this place, the Diocese of Portsmouth.

Two weeks ago, I celebrated the tenth anniversary of my ordination as Bishop. I must thank you for the great number of prayers and cards you kindly sent. Over the last decade, despite the challenge of the pandemic and, more, the toxic effects of an affluent, secular culture, I have sought as the Shepherd of the flock to inspire everyone to look outwards to mission and service. The Church exists to evangelise.<sup>5</sup> It does not *have* a mission: it *is* mission. Bringing people closer to Jesus Christ through His Church is our purpose. Like breathing-in and breathing-out, evangelisation is about ourselves growing in faith, as much as about reaching out to others to propose faith.<sup>6</sup> While the immediate goal of evangelisation is the conversion of individuals, the ultimate goal is the baptism of culture.<sup>7</sup> So this is about digging deeper in order to go out into the deep. It

is about renewal for the sake of outreach. It's about growing in love for Jesus in the Holy Eucharist in order to go out to serve Him in the poor.<sup>8</sup> In this, progress cannot be measured simply by numbers. But the numbers have now become so challenging that we have to act more radically. Doing nothing or 'business as usual,'<sup>9</sup> is not an option, otherwise many, many churches across our Diocese will close down. This is why we now find ourselves, helped by your suggestions, with a much more comprehensive plan. Called *You Will be My Witnesses*, it is an exciting vision, a mission strategy for the next ten years.<sup>10</sup> If the Lord spares me, that is where I believe He wants me to lead our Diocese in the decade ahead.

I want to ask you something. I would like you to download a copy of *You will be My Witnesses* or to take away a leaflet as you leave church, to read it and to reflect on its hope-filled contents. Please then discuss it with your friends and with others in your parish and school communities. Over these next weeks, I've asked all our clergy to lead a consultation, so that we can finalise the plan.<sup>11</sup>

I am sorry: the plan is about change. Indeed, it's about the hardest change of all: changing ourselves. How can I become more holy, closer to Christ? How can I become better formed in my faith? How can our parish put Christ more at the centre? How can we pass on the Faith to the young? What works of charity, justice and ecology might we undertake? Given that across the Diocese the average donation is £2.35 a week - less than a cappuccino - how can we encourage real stewardship, responsibility and tithing? And how can our parish witness to the Gospel in our area? I always remember the challenging question: "If your parish closed tomorrow, would anyone who is not a member care?"<sup>12</sup>

When you read *You will be My Witnesses*, many will focus on the proposed changes to parish structures. Those four pages at the end are about pruning, to release resources for mission. But don't be fooled! Structural change will fail without a deep spiritual change in ourselves and in our communities. We will not be saved by structures: change the structures and all will be well. Sadly, it won't. What we all need now is to draw closer to the Sacred Heart of Christ.

This Christmas, I am going to send you a prayer book. I will also write again, because I want us all to engage in a diocesan Year of Prayer to the Holy Spirit, asking God the Holy Spirit to energise us and to lead us. Indeed, I am going to ask you to establish or pledge to develop six holy habits:

- to keep Sunday special, a family day, by attending Mass;
- to spend 5 minutes a day in prayer using the Scriptures;
- to do penance on Fridays, and to serve the poor and needy;
- every fortnight to make a Holy Half Hour before the Blessed Sacrament;
- to go to Confession once a month; and
- to join a small group for formation, prayer and fellowship.

For every one person who becomes a Catholic, six leave.<sup>13</sup> A key reason why they leave is because, they say, their spiritual needs are not being met.<sup>14</sup> This is deplorable, given that the Church has two thousand years of expertise in prayer, spirituality and sanctity. Yet without beauty and solemnity in our parish Liturgy, without personal help to prayer and meditation, without meeting faith-filled people and families whose hearts and imaginations are on fire with love for the Lord, many will fail to develop a personal friendship with God. No amount of programmes, plans or structural changes can enable this, only an encounter with the Person of Jesus Himself - He Who lays down His life for us. For this to

happen, we need authentically converted disciples; we need warm, welcoming and inclusive parish communities, so that through us they can meet Him.<sup>15</sup>

In today's Gospel, about the "need to pray continually and never lose heart," Jesus seems to end on a note of exasperation: "When the Son of Man comes, will He find any faith on earth?"<sup>16</sup> Like the widow relentlessly petitioning the judge until he gave in, so we too need to be people of prayer. Think of Moses in the First Reading: "As long as he kept his arms raised, Israel had the advantage; but when he let his arms fall, the advantage went to Amalek."<sup>17</sup> True, today many exclude God from their lives or feel they have no need of Him; they live as if there is no God.<sup>18</sup> Yet many others are seeking Him, and Jesus told us: "you will be my witnesses."<sup>19</sup> So we need to be holy. We need to be women and men of prayer. We need to pray continually so that others can find the Way. We need to support and keep close to our parish clergy. And we need to change. Just imagine the revolution in our Diocese if everyone committed to the six holy habits! Imagine the amazing difference it would make if everyone lived life relying on the Holy Spirit! So let us ask the Holy Spirit to guide our Diocese, to help us change and through the prayers of Mary Immaculate and St. Edmund our patron, to bring people closer to Jesus Christ through His Church.

In Corde Iesu,  
+Philip  
Bishop of Portsmouth

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<sup>1</sup> These four attributes or 'marks' of the Church are explored in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London, CTS: 2016) – henceforth CCC – paragraphs 811-870.

<sup>2</sup> CCC 787-801.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Matthew 28: 20. Cf. CCC 807-808.

<sup>4</sup> "God, who is absolutely infallible, thus deigned to bestow upon His new people, which is the Church, a certain shared infallibility, which is restricted to matters of faith and morals, which is present when the whole People of God unhesitatingly holds a point of doctrine pertaining to these matters, and finally which always depends upon the wise providence and anointing of the grace of the Holy Spirit, who leads the Church into all truth until the glorious coming of her Lord" SCDF (1973) *Mysterium Ecclesiae* 2 in H. Denzinger ed. P. Hünermann *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationem de rebus fidei et morum 43rd Edition* (San Francisco, Ignatius: 2012) – henceforth DH - DH 4531.

<sup>5</sup> See Pope St. Paul VI (1975) *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 14 in DH 4573.

<sup>6</sup> As Pope St. Paul VI put it: "The Church is an evangeliser, but she begins by being evangelised herself. She is the community of believers, the community of hope lived and communicated, the community of brotherly love, and she needs to listen unceasingly to what she must believe, to her reasons for hoping, to the new commandment of love" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 15).

<sup>7</sup> See Pope Francis *Evangelii Gaudium* (London, CTS: 2013) 176-258.

<sup>8</sup> We see this in the life of St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta and many of the saints. Thus, Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, patron of our youth, once said: "Jesus pays me a visit in Holy Communion every morning, and I repay him in the miserable way I can by visiting Him in His poor." See C Siccardi *Pier Giorgio Frassati – A Hero for our Times* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press: 2016), 153.

<sup>9</sup> "Until recently, the culture in those places appeared to be soundly Catholic even while the world was embracing a secular orientation. Yet in the space of one generation, the bottom of the Christendom culture fell out". For a discussion of the outcomes of a 'business as usual' type of approach as seen in the 'evaporation' of Catholicism in places such as Ireland, Belgium, Quebec, Germany and many parts of Latin America, see J. Shea *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age* (Bismarck ND, University of Mary Press: 2020) especially 29-34

<sup>10</sup> Diocese of Portsmouth (2022): *You will be My Witnesses. Ten-Year Mission Plan for the Catholic Diocese of Portsmouth (Draft)*. This is available for download from [www.portsmouthdiocese.org.uk](http://www.portsmouthdiocese.org.uk) (October 2022). Of course, we are not the only Diocese in England and Wales facing challenges. Others too are embarking on similar exercises.

<sup>11</sup> A feedback form (available on the diocesan website) will help to structure your reflection.

<sup>12</sup> J. Mallon *Divine Renovation Beyond the Parish* (Frederick Me, The Word Among Us Press: 2020) 35

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<sup>13</sup> See S. Bullivant *Catholic Research Forum Reports 1. Contemporary Catholicism in England and Wales: A statistical report based on recent British Social Attitudes survey data* (Twickenham, St. Mary's University, Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society: 2016) available from <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2018-feb-contemporary-catholicism-report-may16.pdf> (October 2022).

<sup>14</sup> S. Weddell *Forming Intentional Disciples* (Huntington, Our Sunday Visitor: 2012) 15-47.

<sup>15</sup> A priest wrote to me recently: "My own response is to combat all of this by a strategic campaign against poverty: **spiritual** poverty, by elevating the Liturgy, **material** poverty, by feeding the poor and our provision of food banks, **intellectual** poverty, by the provision of catechesis and formation, and **aesthetic** poverty, by the reclaiming of the beauty of our churches ... Despite being willing, able, and committed to this task, all of these campaigns are nothing compared to the one thing necessary, the gift of Faith. I see the four aspects of the Grand Campaign as so many opportunities to turn whatever we can into the vehicles, mechanisms, or catalysts that bring, turn, or ignite the spark of Faith within those hearts that have not yet come to God, or where the fire is dormant or wavering."

<sup>16</sup> Luke 18: 1-8.

<sup>17</sup> Exodus 17: 8-13.

<sup>18</sup> That is, *etsi Deus non daretur*. This phrase was coined by the Dutch lawyer Hugo Grotius (d. 1645) in his *De iure belli ac pacis*: cf. Benedict XVI *General Audience (14<sup>th</sup> November 2012)* online at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va) (October 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Acts 1: 8.