



PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP
 appointed to be read
 in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth
 on 18th December 2022, the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

YEAR OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Dear Faithful Followers of the Lord,

I wish you a very happy Advent and a blessed celebration of Christmas. Today, the Fourth Sunday of Advent, we feel the mystery and excitement of the coming of Christ. We hear in the Gospel the story of St. Joseph's vision and the angel's message: *She has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit.*¹ Joseph got up immediately and, trusting in God, set the wheels in motion. These next few days let us do the same. Let us listen to the Lord and open our hearts in welcome. Let's find space and time for some extra moments in prayer. Let's ensure we receive God's mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and let's do our best to communicate to those around us the true meaning of Christmas, and the gift of hope and joy the Mystery of the Incarnation brings.²

A few weeks ago, you may recall, I sent you a Pastoral Letter about the future of the Diocese of Portsmouth and how we need to act radically.³ I mentioned the ten-year mission strategy, *You Will be My Witnesses*, and how structural change will fail without a deep, personal change in ourselves and in our communities. I asked every member of the Diocese to adopt six holy habits. First, to keep Sunday special, as a family day, by attending Mass, the 'source and summit' of the Christian life, supporting your parish community.⁴ Secondly, to resolve to spend at least five minutes a day in prayer, at whatever time you find best, using the Scriptures, maybe the Gospel of the day.⁵ Thirdly, to keep Friday as a day of penance in honour of the Lord's Passion, intentionally serving the poor and needy.⁶ Fourthly, at least once a fortnight, to pay a private visit to church for a short period of prayer before the Tabernacle.⁷ Fifthly, to go to Confession once a month or so, like a spiritual check-up when you can personally experience God's love and mercy.⁸ And sixthly, to join a small group for formation, prayer and fellowship, where you can share with others your own faith-experience and in turn hear what God is doing in the lives of others.

These six holy habits are surely what every Catholic would want to do. Yet sadly, many let them slip and become lukewarm.⁹ Yet imagine the revolution in our Diocese if everyone committed to these six holy habits! Just imagine the fervour and zeal! Just imagine the light and joy the Catholic community would radiate to others! Research shows, the key reason young people drift away, and others lapse from practice, is because their spiritual needs are not met.¹⁰ The six holy habits offer a practical programme to address this.

- Sunday Mass: how can we enhance the variety, beauty and solemnity of our parish Liturgy? Could I prepare better for Mass, arriving in good time, reading the Gospel and the prayers?
- Daily Prayer: what helps do I need to pray and to know the Bible better? I enjoy myself following the daily calendar and getting to know the saints.
- Friday penance: what does poverty mean in my area and how can I help?
- Visits to church: how can I hear more clearly the voice of Jesus calling me?
- Monthly Confession: how can I best to prepare?¹¹
- Join a group: many groups would welcome new members - or why not start a new one?

The need here is not structural change but personal change, the hardest change of all. It's about an encounter with the Person of Jesus Himself. So let's become people with hearts on fire for the Lord, by adopting these six holy habits.

To help with this, I am sending you a Christmas gift, a Prayer Book, which I hope you will like. It's called *Lord I am not Worthy*. It is meant to help you prepare for Mass. It contains many well-known Catholic prayers and others too. I hope you will dip into it, like a bee seeking nectar, landing on whatever you find helpful.¹² It gives a format for making a visit to the Blessed Sacrament and an easy, three-step guide on making a good Confession. If you set your mind to it, there are many ways to pray, but we get easily distracted, and so a prayer book can be helpful. It is also important to remember that there is only ever one prayer: the prayer of Jesus offered to the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit.¹³ Think of an old radio-set and how you always had to tune it in, to get the station. This is why it is always good to begin a time of prayer by asking the Holy Spirit to tune us in, to align us with Christ and to unite us with the Father.

I also announce a second help. From the 1st January, New Year's Day, the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God, I would like everyone in the Diocese, clergy, religious and laity, to undertake a Year of Prayer to the Holy Spirit. This Year of the Holy Spirit is meant to help our conversion, to deepen our faith, to support our spiritual renewal and to guide our Diocese through this time of transition.¹⁴ It will be up to each of us, and our parish and school communities, to work out how best to keep this Year of the Holy Spirit. But let us pray every day that the Holy Spirit will renew us. Let's ask Him to change and send us out. Let us ask Him to make us grow in love for Jesus in the Holy Eucharist and to serve Him in the poor.¹⁵ But make no mistake: the Holy Spirit disturbs; He turns things upside down; He brings fire and energy. He blows where He wills.¹⁶ He convicts people of sin.¹⁷ He overturns complacency, disrupts our plans and takes us where we would not go. Even so, the Spirit is a Paraclete, a Comforter,¹⁸ pleasant coolness in the heat,¹⁹ a 'frisson' that sets the hairs on our neck tingling. He brings deep unity²⁰ and His activity is visible in twelve fruits: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control and chastity.²¹ The Holy Spirit is exactly Who we need in a Diocese in which doing nothing or 'business as usual'²² is no longer an option.

Let the Lord enter; He is the king of glory we sang in the Psalm.²³ Even though today many in our society deny God or feel they have no need of Him, yet others are seeking Him, which is why Jesus told us: “You will be my witnesses.”²⁴ So we need to be holy, that is, to be like Christ. We need to be women and men of prayer. We need to pray continually, that others through us may find the Way. So let us adopt the six holy habits. Let’s use the prayer book. Let’s open ourselves to the Holy Spirit. Indeed, may the Holy Spirit guide our Diocese; may He help us to change, and through the prayers of Mary Immaculate and St. Edmund, may He bring us all closer to Jesus Christ through His Church.

Thank you for listening – I wish you and your families a happy Christmas.

In Corde Iesu,
+Philip
Bishop of Portsmouth

¹ Matthew 1: 18-24

² “The Virgin today brings into the world the Eternal, and the earth offers a cave to the Inaccessible. The angels and shepherds praise him, and the magi advance with the star. For you are born for us, Little Child, God eternal!” St. Romanos the Melodist (d. 555).

³ Bishop Philip ‘The Future of the Diocese’ is available on the Diocesan website.

See <https://www.portsmouthdiocese.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/20221016-The-future-of-the-Diocese.pdf> (December 2022)

⁴ “The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life. The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] 1324).

⁵ “Let me ask you: Are there moments when you place yourself quietly in the Lord’s presence, when you calmly spend time with him, when you bask in his gaze? Do you let his fire inflame your heart? Unless you let him warm you more and more with his love and tenderness, you will not catch fire. How will you then be able to set the hearts of others on fire by your words and witness? If, gazing on the face of Christ, you feel unable to let yourself be healed and transformed, then enter into the Lord’s heart, into his wounds, for that is the abode of divine mercy” Pope Francis *Gaudete et Exultate* (London, CTS: 2018) 151

⁶ See ‘Re-establishing Friday Penance:’ <https://rcdow.org.uk/news/re-establishing-friday-penance/> (December 2022)

⁷ I am impressed with the Catholic News Agency article *24 Reasons for Spending a Holy Hour before the Blessed Sacrament*: see <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/resource/55478/24-reasons-for-spending-a-holy-hour-before-the-blessed-sacrament> (December 2022)

⁸ Regular confession is good even if we end up confessing the same sins. “It is true. Our sins are always the same, but we clean our homes, our rooms, at least once a week, even if the dirt is always the same; in order to live in cleanliness, in order to start again. Otherwise, the dirt might not be seen but it builds up. Something similar can be said about the soul, for me myself: If I never go to confession, my soul is neglected and in the end I am always pleased with myself and no longer understand that I must always work hard to improve, that I must make progress. And this cleansing of the soul which Jesus gives us in the sacrament of confession helps us to make our consciences more alert, more open, and hence, it also helps us to mature spiritually and as human persons” (Pope Benedict XVI *Message to First Communicants* 29th May 2013)

⁹ “One man sets great value on fasting, and believes himself to be leading a very devout life, so long as he fasts rigorously, although the while his heart is full of bitterness;—and while he will not moisten his lips with wine, perhaps not even with water, in his great abstinence, he does not scruple to steep them in his neighbour’s blood, through slander and detraction. Another man reckons himself as devout because he repeats many prayers daily, although at the same time he does not refrain from all manner of angry, irritating, conceited or insulting speeches among his family and neighbours. This man freely opens his purse in almsgiving but closes his heart to all gentle and forgiving feelings towards those who are opposed to him; while that one is ready enough to forgive his enemies, but will never pay his rightful debts save under pressure” St. Francis de Sales *Introduction to the Devout Life* (London, Burns Oates: 1952) 37. I would really recommend this classic guide to holiness and the spiritual life.

¹⁰ S. Weddell *Forming Intentional Disciples* (Huntington, Our Sunday Visitor: 2012) 15-47. See also Karen North *Research among Catholic Young Adults in England and Wales: How to Disrupt the 'Limbo of Non-Belonging'* (St. Mary's Twickenham, Aquinas Centre: 2021)

¹¹ I recommend what St. Francis de Sales says in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*. See 'Chapter XIX Of Holy Confession' 103-106. Available online at <https://www.discerninghearts.com/catholic-podcasts/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/devoutlife.pdf> (December 2022): see pages 48-49.

¹² "Watch a bee hovering over the mountain thyme; —the juices it gathers are bitter, but the bee turns them all to honey,—and so tells the worldling, that though the devout soul finds bitter herbs along its path of devotion, they are all turned to sweetness and pleasantness as it treads" St. Francis de Sales *Introduction to the Devout Life* 39-40. St. Francis often compares the soul seeking perfection to the life and activity of bees.

Cf. St. Francis de Sales *Introduction to the Devout Life* (

¹³ "There is no other way of Christian prayer than Christ. Whether our prayer is communal or personal, vocal or interior, it has access to the Father only if we pray "in the name" of Jesus. The sacred humanity of Jesus is therefore the way by which the Holy Spirit teaches us to pray to God our Father" (CCC 2664)

¹⁴ Our diocesan Year of the Holy Spirit will also support the important Synodal process that is taking place in the universal Church at this time. The topic of the Synod is "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission" and the process will culminate in a Synod of Bishops scheduled for October 2024.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ Jn 3: 8

¹⁷ Jn 16: 8. Cf. John Paul II *Dominum et Vivificantem* (London, CTS: 1986) 42-45

¹⁸ *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London, CTS: 2006) 138

¹⁹ *Veni Sancte Spiritus* Sequence for Pentecost Sunday, attributed to Pope Innocent III (d. 1216)

²⁰ The Second Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation puts this well: *in hoc salutari convivio eiusdem Spiritum nobis praestare digneris, qui omnia auferat quae nos invicem alienant ('graciously .. endow us with his very Spirit, who takes away everything that estranges us from one another')*.

²¹ CCC 1832; cf. Gal 5: 22-23

²² "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

²³ Psalm 23 Fourth Sunday of Advent Cycle A

²⁴ Acts 1: 8.