



PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP  
 appointed to be read  
 in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth  
 on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2023, the First Sunday of Advent.

## CHRISTIAN SUNDAY

Dearest Brothers and Sisters,

Today is the First Sunday of Advent, when the Church begins a new liturgical year. Let us begin the year by praying for peace in the world and especially for the peoples of Ukraine and the Middle East. During my recent study leave, I have also been praying for the Diocese and for the spiritual renewal that our ten-year mission-strategy calls for.<sup>1</sup> *You Will be My Witnesses* is an inspiring plan and I know that many of you are already striving to put it into practice, responding to its threefold call for deeper faith, for works of mission and service, and for wise stewardship. As I've said before, it's easy to change the structures of the Diocese and its parishes - and structural change is part of the plan - but if we are to become a truly vibrant, welcoming church that is collaborative and missionary, we must make the hardest change of all: changing ourselves. *You Will be My Witnesses* is about changing ourselves, opening our hearts, deepening faith and putting Christ at the centre of everything we do. This is why I want to discuss with you the first of Six Holy Habits: attending Sunday Mass and keeping Sunday as a rest-day. I have some proposals, but let me first ask you: Is Sunday for you simply part of a weekend? Or is it the highlight of your week?

Bear with me a moment. We find in the Book of Genesis that when God created the world, He created humans on the sixth day and on the seventh, He rested.<sup>2</sup> Why did He rest? God rested on the Sabbath in order to step back and delight in all He had made: a vast, interrelated cosmos of profound beauty from atoms and tiny microbes to stars and distant galaxies.<sup>3</sup> It was all good, very good, and at the centre, most beautiful of all, God placed human beings, male and female. He made us not only stewards but the priests of creation, to give 'voice to every creature under heaven,<sup>4</sup> to praise Him and join His sabbath rest. The human person is *homo liturgicus*. We are made for worship!<sup>5</sup> It's our nature, which is why the third of the Ten Commandments bids us to keep holy the Sabbath Day.<sup>6</sup>

Let me add another point. Sunday is *the first day of the week*, it is the day of the Lord's resurrection, a weekly Easter.<sup>7</sup> More, Sunday is the Day of Fire, when the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost to initiate the mission of the Church.<sup>8</sup> As a result, Sunday has become the Day of the Church. At the Last Supper, Jesus said '*Do this in memory of me*' and so every Sunday, we offer up the Sacrifice of the Mass. We gather together as Christ's Church to give thanks and praise. We listen to His Word and He feeds us with His Body and Blood for mission and service.<sup>9</sup>

When I was growing up in Manchester, my Sundays were about sport and play, but by late afternoon, the prospect of a dark, wet evening, with little of interest on the television, was deadly! To avoid this requires a radical change of mindset. So let us first rethink the Lord's Day as the Day of Creation, a day to step back and to *lift up our hearts*. It's a Day to glorify God for all He has created, for all He has accomplished in history, for all that He has given to us personally in the 'narrow strip of space-time' that constitutes our life.<sup>10</sup> So on Sunday, if you can, go outdoors; praise God; appreciate with gratitude the wonders of His design.

But secondly, in today's context it is crucial we keep Sunday special by attending Mass, whatever the cost. I go to Mass not just for my own good, but to support the Christian community and to give a witness to non-believers. In the Roman Empire, to avoid arrest, Christians had to get up very early for Mass before sunrise.<sup>11</sup> In England in penal times, they had to gather in secret. The Church has always insisted that to be a disciple of Christ involves an obligation of love to attend Mass every Sunday.<sup>12</sup> I thank you for your commitment to this, but - I know we all agree - it is distressing that over 90% of Catholics do not practice their faith. What can we do about this? How are we reaching out to those who have drifted away in our families, schools and parishes? Could we invite a friend to Mass? Or Eucharistic Adoration? What about leafleting the neighbourhood with the parish Mass times? Indeed, are the parish Masses at the right times?

Another issue is how best to prepare for Sunday Mass. The Liturgy is the primary place in life we encounter God; it's where Jesus speaks to us and renews us with the Holy Spirit. During the week, let's reflect on the readings and prayers.<sup>13</sup> Plan to arrive for Mass in good time. Participate actively. Ask yourself: How might I offer my charisms and talents for the good of the community? Linger after Mass to commune with the other parishioners; they are my spiritual family.

One more point. Rest is necessary for our health and well-being, so let's try and keep Sunday as a real rest-day that anticipates God's seventh-day rest and the eternal rest of heaven. Sunday is a great family day, a day of down-time to spend with relatives and friends. Sunday is a good day too for works of charity and justice. What about visiting those who are alone, the elderly, a sick person? Of course, I know some of you - it's unavoidable - have to work on a Sunday. But to keep Sunday special, could I intentionally not do shopping? Or laundry? Or emails? Could I fast from the TV or my smartphone or the computer?

In the first Reading, Prophet Isaiah said to the Lord: *You are our Father, we the clay, you the potter: we are all the work of Your hands.*<sup>14</sup> Many people today think God is irrelevant. Yet others seek Him, which is why Jesus told us: "You will be my witnesses."<sup>15</sup> To be His witnesses, we need to be persons of prayer and faith, full of thanks and praise. This Advent and over the months ahead, let us glorify God for His creation, even more for His redemption, and again more, for

choosing you and me to be His disciples within His Church. I pray the Holy Spirit will help us all persevere over the weeks ahead in this first spiritual priority of attending Sunday Mass, and keeping Sunday as a day of rest and re-creation.

In Corde Iesu  
+ Philip  
Bishop of Portsmouth

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.portsmouthdiocese.org.uk/our-mission/planning/ten-year-plan/](http://www.portsmouthdiocese.org.uk/our-mission/planning/ten-year-plan/) (November 2023)

<sup>2</sup> See Genesis 1:26–2:2

<sup>3</sup> “The universe as a whole, in all its manifold relationships, shows forth the inexhaustible riches of God .. [and as] the *Catechism* teaches: ‘God wills the interdependence of creatures. The sun and the moon, the cedar and the little flower, the eagle and the sparrow: the spectacle of their countless diversities and inequalities tells us that no creature is self-sufficient. Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other’” Pope Francis *Laudato Si* (London, CTS: 2015) 86

<sup>4</sup> *..et per nostrum vocem, omnis quae sub caelo est creatura, nomen tuum in exultatione confitemur*’ (lit. ‘and through our voice, every creature which is under heaven, we [too] confess your name in exultation’): *Eucharistic Prayer IV*.

<sup>5</sup> See J. Cardinal Ratzinger (Benedict XVI): *The Divine Project: Reflections on Creation and the Church* (San Francisco, Ignatius: 2022) 48-57

<sup>6</sup> Ex 20:8-10; cf. Deut 5:12-15. See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2168-2195

<sup>7</sup> “We all gather on the day of the sun, for it is the first day [after the Jewish sabbath, but also the first day] when God, separating matter from darkness, made the world; and on this same day Jesus Christ our Saviour rose from the dead” St. Justin, I Apol. 67: PG 6, 429 and 432. St. Augustine calls Sunday ‘the Sacrament of Easter’: see Augustine *In Io. Ev. Tractatus* XX, 20, 2: CCL 36, 203; *Epist.* 55, 2: CSEL 34, 170-171.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 2: 1ff.

<sup>9</sup> See the outstanding Apostolic Letter of St. John Paul II *Dies Domini* (1998), especially Chapter Three ‘Dies Ecclesiae’ 31-54: [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va) (November 2023)

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Bernard Lonergan *Method in Theology* 104f in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan Volume 14* ed. R. Doran and J. Dadowsky (Toronto, University of Toronto Press: 2017).

<sup>11</sup> “‘*Sine dominico non possumus!*’ Without the gift of the Lord, without the Lord’s Day, we cannot live: That was the answer given in the year 304 by Christians from Abitene in present-day Tunisia, when they were caught celebrating the forbidden Sunday Eucharist and brought before the judge. They were asked why they were celebrating the Christian Sunday Eucharist, even though they knew it was a capital offence” Pope Benedict XI *Homily* Saint Stephen’s Cathedral, Vienna (9<sup>th</sup> September 2007): [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2007/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20070909\\_wien.pdf](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20070909_wien.pdf) (November 2023). Later in the same homily, the Pope said: “Without the Lord and without the day that belongs to him, life does not flourish. Sunday has been transformed in our Western societies into the weekend, into leisure time. Leisure time is something good and necessary, especially amid the mad rush of the modern world; each of us knows this. Yet if leisure time lacks an inner focus, an overall sense of direction, then ultimately it becomes wasted time that neither strengthens nor builds us up. Leisure time requires a focus – the encounter with Him who is our origin and goal. My great predecessor in the see of Munich and Freising, Cardinal Faulhaber, once put it like this: ‘Give the soul its Sunday, give Sunday its soul.’”

<sup>12</sup> “On Sundays and other holy days of obligation, the faithful are obliged to participate in the Mass. Moreover, they are to abstain from those works and affairs which hinder the worship to be rendered to God, the joy proper to the Lord’s day, or the suitable relaxation of mind and body” *Code of Canon Law* Can. 1247: cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2181. Concerns about those not attending Mass and the desire to underline the importance of Mass were frequently aired in synods and councils from the fourth century onwards. See for instance the Council of Elvira (300 AD) whose twenty-first canon laid down: “If anyone in the city neglects to come to church for three Sundays, let him be excommunicated for a short time so that he may be corrected.” see St. John Paul II *Dies Domini* 47

<sup>13</sup> Make sure you have your own copy of the Sunday Missal: e.g. *The CTS New Sunday Missal* (London, Catholic Truth Society; 2011). Might you consider taking out a subscription to the monthly booklet *Magnificat*?

<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 64: 8

<sup>15</sup> Clearly the issue here is the cultural context in which we find ourselves and the need to devise appropriate response strategies. Two recent works I have found particularly helpful are J. P. Shea *From Christendom to Apostolic Mission: Pastoral Strategies for an Apostolic Age* (Bismarck ND, University of Mary Press: 2020) and Cardinal J., De Kesel *Faith and Religion in a Secular Society* (New York, Paulist Press: 2022). See also A. Fisher ‘The West: Post- Or Pre-Christian? The 2022 Erasmus Lecture’ in *First Things* (February 2023): <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2023/02/the-west-post--or-pre-christian> (November 2023)