



PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP

appointed to be read
in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth
on 15th January 2017, the Second Sunday of the Year.

THE SACRAMENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Dearest People of God,

The Church has now begun the cycle of Ordinary Time, in which we follow the life and teaching of Jesus, this year according to the Gospel of St. Matthew.¹ Today we stand on the banks of the Jordan, listening to St. John the Baptist saying he saw “the Spirit coming down on Jesus from heaven like a dove and resting on him.”² This descent of God the Holy Spirit makes us reflect on the Sacrament which gives the gift of that Spirit, and which this Eastertime many of our young will be receiving, namely, the Sacrament of Confirmation.

The Holy Spirit is powerfully active in all the Sacraments, but especially in the Sacrament of Confirmation. Confirmation completes and perfects the grace of Baptism.³ It is Pentecost made personal.⁴ The Holy Spirit helps us to pray, to be spiritual, to become firmly rooted in the life and Word of God.⁵ He unites us with Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, in a personal-passionate friendship. He seals us with seven spiritual powers, three for the mind and four for the will, to help us find the right way in life, to conquer sin and evil, and to reach our heavenly home. He keeps us firmly in communion with the Catholic Church, enabling us to spread the Faith, enhancing us with charisms and gifts for service and mission.⁶ This is why everyone should be confirmed.⁷ Nowadays, the Sacrament is conferred not by fire and wind as at Pentecost but by the laying on of hands and an anointing with the oil of chrism. In the Eastern Catholic Churches, the priest administers Confirmation after a baby’s Baptism, but our Western practice has been to reserve the Sacrament to the Bishop and thus to confer it after Baptism at a later, suitable moment.⁸

¹² See comments by S. Weddell *Forming Intentional Disciples* (Huntington IN, Our Sunday Visitor: 2012) 15-47.

¹³ Interesting here is the work of Fr. Robert Spitzer SJ and *The Magis Centre*. Spitzer tackles the various popular myths that millennials find blocking their path to Christian faith: see www.magiscenter.com (January 2017)

¹⁴ What is said here applies only to young adults being confirmed as part of the usual annual programmes. Adults may be confirmed at other times by their parish priest, with a dispensation from the Bishop.

¹⁵ The total population of the Diocese of Portsmouth is approximately 3,135,000, of whom c. 230,000 are baptised Catholics. Of these, c. 35,000 attend Sunday Mass. The diocesan *Directory 2017* gives a more

detailed overview by parish, pastoral area and deanery.

¹⁶ “The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify men, to build up the Body of Christ and, finally, to give worship to God. Because they are signs they also instruct. They not only presuppose faith, but by words and objects they also nourish, strengthen, and express it. That is why they are called ‘sacraments of faith’”

Sacrosanctum Concilium 59; cf. CCC 1122-1126.

¹⁷ See CCC 2670-2672 for a brief commentary on this ancient prayer. The first part is the *Magnificat* antiphon for Pentecost. The versicle and response are from the readings for Pentecost Sunday. The collect comes from the Votive Mass of the Holy Spirit.

Come, Holy Spirit,

fill the hearts of your faithful,

and enkindle in them the fire of your love.

V/. Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created

R/. And you shall renew the face of the earth.

Let us pray.

O God, who taught the hearts of the faithful

by the light of the Holy Spirit,

grant that by the gift of the same Spirit,

we may always be truly wise

and ever rejoice in his consolation.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Veni, Sancte Spiritus,

reple tuorum corda fidelium:

et tu amoris in eis ignem accende.

V/. Emitte Spiritum tuum, et creabuntur.

R/. Et renovabis faciem terrae.

Oremus.

Deus, qui corda fidelium

Sancti Spiritus illustratione docuisti,

da nobis in eodem Spiritu

recta sapere

et de eius semper consolatione gaudere.

Per Christum Dominum nostrum. Amen.

¹⁸ We need to ponder constantly what Pope Francis calls for in Paragraph 27 of *Evangelii Gaudium* (London, CTS: 2013):

“I dream of a ‘missionary option’, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today’s world rather than for her self-

preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in

this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity

on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth

and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with

himself.”

Over the last decades, there has been much discussion about Confirmation. For instance, how might our theological understanding of this Sacrament be deepened? Would it be better to adopt the Eastern practice of conferring Confirmation at Baptism? Or to restore the ancient order of the Sacraments, putting Confirmation before First Holy Communion? Many wonder about the best age for Confirmation: seven, eleven or eighteen?⁹ But to me one thing is clear: we cannot continue indefinitely our current practice, because many of the young who receive this Sacrament afterwards drift away.¹⁰

Recently someone lamented to me that only two of their 40 newly confirmed practice their faith, despite a fine programme of catechesis and an uplifting celebration in the Cathedral. I replied provocatively: "You catechised them. You sacramentalised them. But did you convert them?" Evangelisation is first and foremost about conversion, a religious experience of meeting Jesus Christ and being called personally by Him with a transformed heart. We need to enable the conversion of young Catholics, not just to catechise them.¹¹ This also applies to adults. Surveys show that many practicing adults, even leading parishioners, are not sure God is personal, that they can have a real friendship with God, or that serving God is more than a habit or a hobby.¹² Further, we need to take care that our catechesis tackles the real blockages to faith many people today struggle with: the existence of God, why a good God allows so much suffering in the world, the uniqueness and divinity of Christ, freedom and responsibility, sexuality, and the relationship of science and religion.¹³

Let me endorse – at least for the time being – some aspects of our current diocesan policy on Confirmation.¹⁴ Normally, the Bishop confers Confirmation at the Cathedral on the weekends of Eastertide. This underlines the Western tradition, which links Confirmation to the Bishop, and enables the celebration to occur in the correct liturgical season. A 'Going Forth Mass' and celebration for the newly confirmed can then be arranged subsequently in their home parish or Pastoral Area. Candidates should be at least 13 years old. Resources permitting, the Confirmation course should span two years: one year up to the Sacrament, then a follow-on year of continuing formation, with prayer, fun and a work of practical charity. This helps deepen the call to discipleship, by forming a peer support-group that will also enable links with our diocesan youth programmes. Each Pastoral Area will have Confirmation every two years, except where local circumstances suggest otherwise. Finally, I ask candidates to choose as a Confirmation name a Saint from the current Roman Missal. This ensures that they have a Patron Saint they can readily relate to, as well as an annual celebration with the rest of the diocesan community.

In today's secular culture, only a small minority of Catholics practice their faith.¹⁵ New evangelisation is about reaching out and fanning into a flame smouldering wicks. We need to review our pastoral practices around Baptism, first Holy Communion and Confirmation. The Sacraments are not magic. They effect what they signify, but, as Vatican II taught, they are Sacraments of faith, presupposing faith.¹⁶ In June this year, I have called a Convocation of the Clergy; one topic will be the Sacraments of Initiation and their celebration in today's context. Please pray that over the coming years we might discover new ways forward, appropriate to the 21st century. This is why what I have said above about Confirmation is not forever, but simply "for the time being."

Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will. These words of today's Psalm should not only be on the lips of those to be confirmed but on our lips too. The world at the moment is full of uncertainty and immense problems, as well as violence and war. Today is a Day of Prayer for Peace. As Christians, our task is to work for peace, that is, for the coming of God's Kingdom, for justice and for a sustainable ecology. For this, we have been baptised by Jesus with the Holy Spirit. We are called and gifted persons. We are meant to be dependent upon and animated by the Holy Spirit. Please say each morning, the prayer *Come Holy Spirit!*¹⁷ Say too: *Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will.* Pray that we will be a young, fresh, missionary Church, one with deep love for our splendid Catholic Tradition, yet one thoroughly open to modern ways of working.¹⁸ Indeed, through the intercession of Mary Immaculate and St. Edmund of Abingdon, may God bless us all abundantly this New Year, 2017.

In Corde Iesu
+ Philip
Bishop of Portsmouth

¹ The *General Introduction to the Lectionary* explains the role of the Word of God in the Liturgy, and the organisation and plan of the readings: see 1-10, 17, 58-63, 103f. and especially pp. xlviii – xlix on Year A (all in *Volume One*). See also Congregation for Divine Worship *Homiletic Directory* (London, CTS: 2014) 140-149, especially 143.

² John 1: 29-34.

³ "Confirmation is the Sacrament that completes Baptism; in it the gift of the Holy Spirit is bestowed upon us. Any one who freely decides to live a life as God's child and asks for God's Spirit under the signs of the imposition of hands and anointing with chrism receives the strength to witness to God's love and might in word and deed. He is now a full-fledged, responsible member of the Catholic Church." *YOUCAT* 204.

⁴ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [henceforth CCC] 1288.

⁵ St. Paul says: "The Spirit you received .. is the spirit of sons, and it makes us cry out 'Abba! Father!'"

⁶ "The effect of this sacrament is that the Holy Spirit is given for strength as he was given to the apostles on the day of Pentecost, in order that Christians may courageously confess the name of Christ" Council of

⁷ Florence *Exultate Deo* (1439) DS (DH) 1319. Cf. *Lumen Gentium* 11.

⁸ "The faithful are obliged to receive this sacrament at the proper time. Parents and pastors of souls, especially pastors of parishes, are to take care that the faithful are properly instructed to receive the sacrament and come to it at the appropriate time" (*Code of Canon Law* 890). The *Catechism* adds that if "a

⁹ Christian is in danger of death, any priest can give him Confirmation. Indeed the Church desires that none of her children, even the youngest, should depart this world without having been perfected by the Holy Spirit with the gift of Christ's fullness" (CCC 1314).

¹⁰ For more on this, see CCC 1290-1292. CCC 1302 explains how in the Latin Rite the ordinary minister of Confirmation is the Bishop.

¹¹ "In the Latin Rite, the ordinary minister of Confirmation is the bishop. If the need arises, the bishop may grant the faculty of administering Confirmation to priests, although it is fitting that he confer it himself, mindful that the celebration of Confirmation has been temporally separated from Baptism

¹² sacrament of Holy Orders. The administration of this sacrament by them demonstrates clearly that its effect is to unite those who receive it more closely to the Church, to her apostolic origins, and to her mission of bearing witness to Christ."

¹³ For these and other theological, pastoral and anthropological considerations, see L. Walsh *Sacraments of Initiation. A Theology of Life, Word and Rite* (Chicago, Hillenbrand Books: 2011) 145 – 214 passim.

¹⁴ "This is not in any way to blame or criticize the young! We do have many inspiring young adults across our Diocese, who are truly intentional disciples of the Lord.

¹⁵ See S. Hahn *Evangelizing Catholics* (Huntington IN, Our Sunday Visitor: 2014) 47-57