

⁷ See loving4life.co.uk (June 2016)

⁸ For more on this, see smartloving.org/courses-2/united-kingdom/ (June 2016)

⁹ Luke 10: 25-37



PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP

appointed to be read
in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth
on 10th July 2016, the Fifteenth Sunday of the Year.

GETTING MARRIED

Dear Families and Friends,

In April, Pope Francis issued a long-awaited document called *Amoris Laetitia*, 'The Joy of Love'.¹ It sums up the two Synods of Bishops held in Rome in 2014 and 2015 on the pastoral care of marriage and the mission of the family. It is a remarkable document. It not only gives a fresh presentation of Jesus' teaching on marriage and the family, but it urges us to address the messiness often present in relationships. *Amoris Laetitia* looks at four areas: how to promote the vocation to marriage among young people today, in a culture in which permanent commitments are increasingly alien. Secondly, it proposes ways we might improve the preparation of engaged couples for marriage. It asks us, thirdly, to give better support to Christian families and those already married. And fourthly, it urges us to do all we can to assist those in troubled relationships and so-called 'irregular unions': as Christians, how can we reach out to them with God's mercy?²

Over the next couple of years or so in the Diocese of Portsmouth, I would like us all, clergy and people, building on the good work already being done, to review and develop our pastoral practice in these four areas: marriage promotion, marriage preparation, marriage care and marriage 'repair'. Indeed, in the light of *Amoris Laetitia*, I want us to develop new approaches to getting married. In this regard, I have already asked our Schools Department to review what is taught in the school curriculum, especially what is required for a valid marriage. Some of our secondary schools support *Explore*, in which faithfully-married couples visit school to share with the young the joys of married life and the secrets of a lasting relationship.³ But it would be helpful to develop a richer theology and deeper culture of vocation throughout the Diocese. Like ordination, marriage is a call from God, a blessed state of life, a service *in* the

Church for the world.

Another crucial area is how we prepare engaged couples for marriage. Often when a couple contacts the priest, they have been in a relationship for some time and have made many plans. This is why after consultation, I must now ask that anyone resident in the Diocese of Portsmouth, who wishes to get married in a church either here in this country or elsewhere, should ordinarily give their pastor a minimum of twelve months' notice. Most weddings these days are planned well over a year in advance, but this new diocesan norm makes clear the desire of the Christian community to assist couples from the earliest opportunity. It will give time to speak of the beauty of Christian marriage and its life-long nature, to invite couples to come to know family prayer and to know better the Person of Jesus Christ. Ensuring time for a fuller marriage preparation course, it also allows all the paper-work and other arrangements, especially if for abroad, to take place.

Another point. Ordinarily, I would like Catholics getting married in church to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation, which completes our Christian initiation and is the foundation of our lives as disciples of Jesus.⁴ After all, marriage is a vocation to service like the priesthood, and so just as the priesthood and the promise of celibacy "for the sake of the Kingdom"⁵ needs the help of the Holy Spirit and His gifts, so too does married life.

For marriage preparation, our diocesan Family-Life Team recommends the programme called *Engage*,⁶ to complement the inputs of the pastor and those from other providers such as *Marriage Care*. I hope too we can offer eventually some diocesan days of recollection for engaged couples. Indeed, as a special event next February, I am going to invite all the engaged couples of our diocese to join me at the Cathedral for a Valentine's Day celebration.

This weekend in Basingstoke, I am offering an annual Mass for those this year celebrating a significant wedding anniversary: 25, 40, 50 and 60 years of marriage. Almost 90 couples are coming with between them 3,500 years of marriage! This Mass is always a moving occasion, a moment to give thanks to God for the example given. I wish to suggest that every parish welcome back its newly-weds for a blessing and I wish too to encourage all couples, if they can, occasionally to undertake together a weekend retreat such as a *Loving4Life Marriage Enrichment Retreat*⁷ or a *SmartLoving Seminar*.⁸ Meanwhile, I am happy to say that the Catholic Grandparents Association is becoming established across the diocese. Grandparents are people very special to our families and an important spiritual support for the young.

When *Amoris Laetitia* was published, there was a controversy about the care of the divorced and remarried. In fact, Pope Francis reaffirms Jesus' teaching on chastity, marriage, sexuality and family life; he does not change Church discipline. But he does speak in a new compassionate way about those who have drifted from the practice of faith because they have found themselves in marital situations and patterns of behaviour at variance with the Gospel. He urges us to adopt a new attitude, not to be shrill or hard-line judgmental, but always to reach out with God's mercy, to shew compassion, to include not exclude, to foster growth and discernment. In this, pastors have an important

role of guidance and accompaniment. And let us not forget the sensitive work of our diocesan marriage tribunal, a real agency of Divine mercy. Indeed, please pray for all who generously assist its endeavours.

"Go and do the same yourself", Jesus says in today's Gospel.⁹ The Parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most impressive teachings of Jesus about mercy. It captures perfectly how, if we want to be happy in life and to gain heaven, we must love God always and love those who have fallen by the wayside. Love and relationships are areas of life where concupiscence, the disordered desires resulting from Original Sin, can often have damaging effects. This is why, as disciples of Jesus, we must be Good Samaritans. For this intention, let us turn to the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph for help and inspiration. Indeed, may our hearts be filled with the love and mercy of the Heart of Christ.

Meanwhile, have a good summer!

In Corde Iesu
+ Philip
Bishop of Portsmouth

¹ Pope Francis *Amoris Laetitia* (London, CTS: 2016). The Apostolic Exhortation is also available online: w2.vatican.va/cesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html (June 2016). See also the Pastoral Message I issued welcoming it: www.portsmouthdiocese.org.uk (June 2016)

² See *Amoris Laetitia* passim, but especially 31-57, 205-216, 217-240, 241-252 and 291-312.

³ For more on this, see www.theexploreeperience.co.uk (June 2016)

⁴ "Catholics who have not yet received the Sacrament of Confirmation are to receive it before they are admitted to marriage if it can be done without grave inconvenience" *Code of Canon Law* 1065 §1. Marriage is a sacrament of commitment and service and so it is fitting that partners should be fully initiated into the Church. By reiterating this here, I hope to encourage everyone to receive this Sacrament. This is best done during teenage years, following our usual diocesan practice. However, if a Catholic preparing for marriage has not yet received this Sacrament, s/he might be encouraged to receive it, in order to reach a deeper love for the Lord and to become a more intentional disciple. In such circumstances, the Sacrament may be conferred by the parish priest, with the Bishop's permission and after the requisite catechesis, at an appropriate point during the marriage-preparation period. On the other hand, of course, Canon 1065 does recognise that there may be particular circumstances in which the pastor judges it more expedient for reception of the Sacrament to be deferred until a later occasion.

⁵ Mt 19: 10-12

⁶ Every parish and Pastoral Area currently has its own unique marriage preparation processes. I invite all our clergy and people to review their current practices to ensure they are covering the sacramental theology of marriage, the spirituality of marriage and family life, advice on NFP and communication skills. *Engage* is a help with all this. Its six sessions can easily be 'slotted into' the series of four or five meetings the couple usually has with the priest or deacon in order to complete the necessary paper work and prepare the liturgy. It can supplement the input from *Marriage Care* and from other providers. It uses a modern multi-media approach. It can be presented by the priest, by married couple mentors (diaconal couples particularly recommended), by one person or by a team. It can be used with individual couples in the home or parish, or (ideally) in a small group or a larger parish-based group. While the priority of *Engage* is preparing a couple for their marriage, attention is also given to the relationship with the parish community, and couples are encouraged to continue and build on this relationship after their marriage. For more, see the diocesan website. *Engage* is widely used in the Archdiocese of Westminster and in certain other dioceses too: see for instance, rcdow.org.uk/diocese/marriage-and-family-life/resources/engage/ (June 2016)