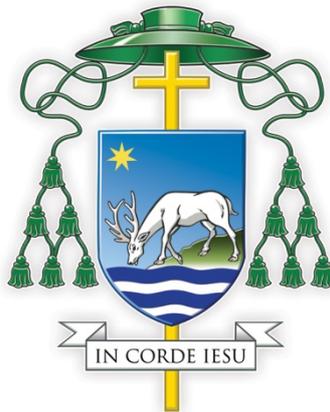


BISHOP OF PORTSMOUTH

Rt. Rev. Philip A. Egan BA, STL, PhD



MESSAGE FROM BISHOP PHILIP

to the Clergy and People of the Diocese of Portsmouth
about the Visit to Bamenda and the Future of our Partnership

I returned a week ago from a seven-day visit to the Archdiocese of Bamenda in Cameroon. I wish immediately to express my gratitude to Archbishop Cornelius, Auxiliary Bishop Agapitus and the priests, religious and people of the Archdiocese of Bamenda for their generous hospitality and also to Colm Lennon, Sylvia Foster, Jo Overton, Fr James McAuley and other members of our Bamenda Committee for their superb organisation of the visit.

The Diocese of Portsmouth has had a special link with the Archdiocese of Bamenda for 40 years and I led a delegation of 26 priests and people from our parishes and schools to celebrate the Ruby Jubilee of this relationship. The delegation stayed at the Pastoral Centre high on a hill overlooking the city, whilst I stayed downtown at the Cathedral with Archbishop Cornelius and Bishop Agapitus. During the week, we variously visited some of the schools and parishes, mission-stations and health-clinics both within the city and in nearby towns that are linked with our Diocese of Portsmouth through our practical support and sponsorship. We also visited Our Lady of Bamenda Abbey, a thriving Cistercian Monastery at Mbengwi, and the Dominican Convent at Bambui, as well as the provincial seminary nearby, where I addressed the 270 seminarians and formation staff. There were special Masses offered in thanksgiving to God, including a large-scale celebration in the Cathedral on Wednesday 19th February, packed with priests and people from all over the Archdiocese. This was the high-point of the week of celebrations.

Personally, I have returned home with many colourful memories and powerful emotions. It will take me a long time to digest and appropriate them. It was for me a most moving testimony and celebration of the unity and Catholicity of the Church, *sub Petro et cum Petro*. I have never been to Cameroon before. Indeed, this was my first ever visit to Africa.

Cameroon has poor infrastructure with bumpy roads, yet it is a truly beautiful country, verdant, tropical, with lots of fruit, vegetables and other natural resources. Most of its people, at least those in the parts we visited, are farmers, working on the land and selling their produce at the roadside or in markets

along the streets. They are enterprising and busy. They live in simple houses with little in the way of luxury, yet manage always to turn out smartly dressed for church and are particularly happy when taking lots of photographs with their latest cameras and cell-phones! They are beautiful people, physically strong with distinguished and noble features. Ethnically diverse, they are mostly Francophone, although Bamenda is in one of the two English-speaking regions in Cameroon. They are the most joyful, energetic, 'natural' and happy people I have ever met. Moreover, they are full of deep Catholic faith. The liturgies we celebrated, with their rhythmic songs and dancing, lasted for hours. Full of prayer and devotion, these celebrations were truly a model of that "full, conscious, active participation" *Sacrosanctum Concilium* called for.

The Archdiocese of Bamenda is growing rapidly, with 8,000 adult baptisms this past year alone and 9 new priests due to be ordained this Easter. It was Bishop Derek Worlock, on the advice of Fr. Noel Hanrahan MHM, who first proposed establishing a link between our dioceses to the then Bishop of Bamenda, Paul Verdzekov. Bishop Worlock had been inspired by the words of *Ad Gentes*, Vatican II's decree on missionary activity, which says:

"[all] bishops, as members of the body of bishops succeeding to the College of Apostles, are consecrated not just for some one diocese, but for the salvation of the entire world. The mandate of Christ to preach the Gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15) primarily and immediately concerns them, *sub Petro et cum Petro* ('with Peter and under Peter'). Whence there arises that communion and cooperation of churches which is so necessary today for carrying on the work of evangelisation. In virtue of this communion, the individual churches bear the burden of care for them all, and make their necessities known to one another, and exchange mutual communications regarding their affairs, since the extension of the Body of Christ is the duty of the whole College of Bishops" (*AG 38*).

That year, Fr. Ron Hishon and Fr. Michael Peters from our diocese volunteered to work in Bamenda as *Fidei Donum* priests. Eight other priests followed in the succeeding two decades and Bishops Worlock, Emery and Hollis themselves made periodic visitations to Bamenda. On this 2014 trip, it was wonderful to have with us Fr. Tony Gatt and Fr. Peter Codd who themselves worked for a time in parishes in Bamenda. Indeed, one of the seminarians in Bambui surprised Fr. Peter by thanking him for having baptised him! At the moment we do not have any Portsmouth priests working in Bamenda but we do have 4 fine Bamenda priests working with us. I hope in future we can continue to share clergy as a means of bringing pastoral advantage and spiritual enrichment.

I see the link between the Diocese of Portsmouth and the Archdiocese of Bamenda as an 'ecclesial exchange' that brings both dioceses many graces and blessings. Indeed, I would like our two dioceses to be 'fused' even more closely together in the work of evangelisation so that we will see ourselves as partners with a joint evangelising mission, they in Cameroon, we in Portsmouth. Better together! Although our respective contexts and missions are diverse, yet we stand to gain so much from being partners and helping each other.

I am sure from here we will be able to continue financially supporting projects in Bamenda's parishes, schools and hospitals, and I would like to thank everyone in Portsmouth for their continuing generosity as we look to the future. But I would want the partnership between us to be about more than supporting

projects, however vital. The gain for Bamenda is clear and practical but our gain in Portsmouth is the conviction that with the Lord 'in giving we receive.' Indeed, I would say that we can look to Bamenda for earnest prayer and vibrant faith. We need the clergy and people of Bamenda to refresh our hearts and to reinvigorate our spirituality, to instil within us a new enthusiasm for our Catholic faith, to show us how to evangelise ourselves and to evangelise others. We need them to help us rediscover the *evangelii gaudium*, a real love for Jesus, a new ardour for discipleship and a renewed commitment to Christ's Church, her liturgy and her teaching.

In view of this, I would hope to return to Bamenda (maybe in early 2016?) with the Bishop's Council, Heads of Department and some of our Framework Team Leaders, together with members of the Bamenda Committee. The aim would be to deepen our awareness of the intimate ecclesial partnership between our two dioceses and afterwards to help cascade that awareness across our whole Diocese of Portsmouth, our Pastoral Areas, and our parish and our school communities. The Bamenda Committee is intentionally located on the right hand side of the Framework for Collaboration, as a work of diocesan outreach led by the Department of New Evangelisation. I ask the Bamenda Committee to review its operation within the Framework, and to link with other Teams, helping them to become more conscious of the ecclesial exchange and collaborating with them on joint projects. In this way, a sense of the Portsmouth-Bamenda partnership can pervade all that we do.

This June, a return delegation of some 30 Catholics from Bamenda, together with Archbishop Cornelius, will be visiting our diocese. The visit takes place from 15th to 23rd June and the high point will be a Mass of Thanksgiving in the Cathedral on Saturday 21st June at 11 am. Please put the date in your diary now! More details will be given soon. We are also sending out some prayer cards to every parish to mark the 40th anniversary. I have asked our clergy to make these available to parishioners and to encourage everyone to pray for a deeper communion in faith, hope and love, both among ourselves and between ourselves and the clergy and people of Bamenda.

The recent visit was a powerful experience. I hope that, besides individual and small group visits over the years ahead, we might have larger-scale diocesan exchange visits, say, every five or ten years, depending on our resources. But for now, let us thank God for all he has given us these last 40 years. This is only the first 40 years! I am sure we can look forward to receiving from the Lord many more graces and blessings to come.

With my prayers and best wishes,

In Corde Iesu,

+Philip

1st March 2014
The Feast of St David