



PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP
 appointed to be read
 in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth
 on 17th March 2024, the Fifth Sunday of Lent.

REGULAR CONFESSION

Dearest Friends,

Today is the Fifth Sunday of Lent, when the Church's liturgical year undergoes a step-change. We now enter the period of Late-Lent or Passiontide. Indeed, next Sunday is Palm Sunday when we hear the Passion Narrative and when we begin Holy Week, commemorating the Lord's entry into Jerusalem.¹ These last days of Lent are a time to focus on Christ's suffering and death *for us and for our salvation*,² a time to meditate on the Gospel accounts of the Lord's crucifixion, a time to visit and re-visit the Stations of the Cross.³ A wonderful way of engaging with this, if you have not done so already this Lent, is to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance. Often in life, we can get tightly bound up by our sins and selfishness, closed to the healing power of God's love. This is the season when Jesus wants to set us free. So let us ask Him for the grace to make a good confession, that we may be liberated from whatever it is that holds us back from more truly loving God and loving our neighbour, and from becoming the kind of person the Lord wants us to be.

Not so long ago on a parish visitation, a parishioner said to me after Mass: 'Father, I hope you are not going to close our parish?' I said, 'No,' and looking at her for a moment, I added: 'It won't be me that closes your parish.' Our ten-year mission-plan *You Will be My Witnesses* is not about closing parishes but about renewing parishes, but that renewal starts personally with you and me.⁴ Holy people are major influencers. Take a woman called Mary Bojaxhiu.⁵ When at age 18 she joined the Sisters of Loreto, no one had any idea that she would one day preside over the fastest growing religious congregation in Church history. Today, she is known as St. Mother Teresa. There are 5000 Missionaries of Charity in 133 countries. They serve the poorest of the poor.⁶ They run homes for the dying, soup kitchens for the homeless, dispensaries, schools and

orphanages. All of this came about through her relationship with God and through her selfless generosity. A truly holy person can really transform things.

Our mission-plan is principally about helping each one of us to become more holy, people of deeper faith, more zealous disciples of Christ. By becoming holier ourselves, we become more missionary and, like fire, the Light of Christ will catch. This is why last year I proposed we all adopt Six Holy Habits: attending Sunday Mass, spending five minutes a day in prayer, keeping Fridays as a day of penance, paying a visit to Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, joining a small group for formation, prayer and fellowship, and going to Confession once a month or so.⁷ It's this last Habit that many find difficult: the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Bear with me. Some people think they never sin, or never do anything wrong.⁸ Yet – leaving aside serious sins - they are not averse to a bit of gossip, bearing a grudge, criticising others or constantly thinking of 'Number One.' Others ask: Why confess to a priest, when in my head I can ask God for forgiveness directly? Yet, as we see with the Lord and the Apostles on Easter Sunday, sacramental confession and absolution is the way God wanted it.⁹ True, we can and we should pray to God for forgiveness, as we do at the start of Mass, but it's only in Confession that we can be certain that God has forgiven us and can receive a penance. The Sacrament is a concrete, tangible way to experience God's mercy, for when the priest absolves us, it is Christ Himself Who heals us.¹⁰ How often should we go? As soon as we can, if we are aware of serious sin.¹¹ Otherwise, I would recommend once a month or every two months.¹² It's like a regular check-up. It makes us accountable. It strengthens us against temptation. It brings advice from the priest about our spiritual life. What if we sin again in the same way? Some patterns of sin can be addictive. They take a long time to eradicate - and maybe we should be thankful we are not committing new sins.

So how do we make a good confession? After overcoming any inertia, fear or resistance, preparation is key: prayer to the Holy Spirit and a careful examination of conscience. You can find on the internet many examinations of conscience or use the helpful guide in the prayer-book *Lord I am not Worthy*.¹³ You need to be sorry for your sins, to ask God's forgiveness and to pray for the grace to avoid them in the future. Here is an Act of Contrition: "O my God, because You are so good, I am very sorry that I have sinned against You, but by the help of Your grace I will not sin again."¹⁴ St. John Vianney, the patron saint of parish priests, used to spend 18 hours a day hearing confessions and people came to him from as far away as England and America. He once said: "It is a beautiful thought, my children, that we have a Sacrament which heals the wounds of our soul!"¹⁵

In today's Gospel, the Greeks who approached Philip said: "Sir, we should like to see Jesus."¹⁶ We too would like to see Jesus, but sadly, it is our sins that cloud our vision. They weigh us down. They take away our joy and make us listless. And this is not to overlook the damage and hurt they do to others. No one can give the peace and serenity the Church gives through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This is why I myself love going to Confession, and going often. So, even if you have not been for years, now is the time to come back, to give it a go, to approach the Heart of Jesus, rich in mercy and love. We prayed in the Psalm: "A pure heart create for me, O God." This week and next, let us make this prayer a reality by celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation and establishing a new habit in our lives: regular Confession. It will change everything. It will help you grow in holiness. It will prosper the renewal of the Church in our Diocese.

Thank you for listening.

In Corde Iesu
+ Philip
Bishop of Portsmouth

¹ “On this day the Church recalls the entrance of Christ the Lord into Jerusalem to accomplish his Paschal Mystery” *The Roman Missal. English Translation according to the Third Typical Edition* (London, CTS: 2010) 297.

² ‘*Qui propter nos homines et propter nostrum salutem descendit de caelis*’ Nicene Creed. This phrase first appears in the *Ancoratus* (374) of Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis, and thereafter in many other credal formularies from the late 4th century: see DH 42

³ See Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines* (London, CTS: 2002) 127-135.

⁴ See www.portsmouthdiocese.org.uk/our-mission/planning/ten-year-plan/ (November 2023)

⁵ For an authorised biography, see K. Spink *Mother Teresa* (San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco: 1997)

⁶ M. Muggerridge *Something Beautiful for God* (London, HarperCollins: 1971) 105-113

⁷ See especially the Pastoral Letter for 18th December 2022, PL 32 *The Year of the Holy Spirit*: https://www.portsmouthdiocese.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/PL32_Year_of_the_Holy_Spirit.pdf (March 2024)

⁸ Yet the apostle John says, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8)

⁹ See John 20: 22-23. Jesus established this Sacrament on Easter Sunday: “the Lord .. principally instituted the sacrament of penance, when, being raised from the dead, He breathed upon His disciples, saying Receive ye the Holy Ghost, whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them, and whose sins you shall retain, they are retained. By which action so signal, and words so clear, the consent of all the Fathers has ever understood, that the power of forgiving and retaining sins was communicated to the apostles and their lawful successors, for the reconciling of the faithful who have fallen after baptism” Council of Trent *Doctrine on the Sacrament of Penance*: DH 1670. The Catechism expresses it like this: “Individual, integral confession and absolution remain the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church, unless physical or moral impossibility excuses from this kind of confession. There are profound reasons for this. Christ is at work in each of the sacraments. He personally addresses every sinner: ‘My son, your sins are forgiven.’ He is the physician tending each one of the sick who need him to cure them. He raises them up and reintegrates them into fraternal communion. Personal confession is thus the form most expressive of reconciliation with God and with the Church” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1484)

¹⁰ There is a further and important point here. Every sin we commit, even the most secret, is an offence not only against God and against my own good, but against the Christian community of which I am a part. My sins and my faults always affect others. So, in confessing our sins to the priest and declaring our sorrow, we are also seeking implicitly the forgiveness of the Church. As Christians, it is never just ‘me and God’ but ‘we and God.’ Everything we are and everything we do, we do as members of Christ’s Church.

¹¹ “Individual and integral confession of grave sins followed by absolution remains the only ordinary means of reconciliation with God and with the Church” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1497)

¹² “Without being strictly necessary, confession of everyday faults (venial sins) is nevertheless strongly recommended by the Church. Indeed, the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, let ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit. By receiving more frequently through this sacrament the gift of the Father’s mercy, we are spurred to be merciful as he is merciful” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1458)

¹³ A nightly examination of conscience helps: what to thank God for and what to say sorry to Him for. For an examination and also a simple guide on what to do, try: National Catholic Register *Confession Guide: Examination of Conscience* <https://www.ncregister.com/info/confession-guide-for-adults> (March 2024)

¹⁴ *A Simple Prayer Book* (London, CTS: 1986) 4

¹⁵ ‘A Catechism on Confession by St. John Vianney’ on <https://acatholiclife.blogspot.com> (March 2024)

¹⁶ John 12: 21