



PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP
 appointed to be read
 in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth
 on 10th September 2023, the Twenty-Third Sunday of the Year.

YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES

Dear Friends of Jesus,

In today's Gospel, Our Lord promised that if we pray together in His name, the Father will grant it.¹ So before coming to the reason why I am writing this Pastoral Letter, I wish to put before you three prayer-intentions.

First, today is Education Sunday. Let us thank God for our Catholic schools and pray for all those engaged in their life, work and mission: students, teachers, staff, governors and parents.² Pray especially for our diocesan Schools Team, for our Heads and Principals, and for more vocations to teaching.

A second intention. In three weeks' time, the Synod of Bishops will gather in Rome to explore how the Church might become more 'participative' in its ways of working.³ It will look at the leadership of the pope, the bishops and the clergy and how to enable every member of the Church to take a fuller, more active part in its life and mission. The Synod on Synodality is of great importance to the universal Church and will gather again next year for a second session.⁴ Please pray that the Holy Spirit will closely guide the whole of this historic process.

And thirdly, I kindly ask you to pray for me, your bishop. I am taking a period of study-leave away from the Diocese. I am going for ten weeks to the Catholic University of America to undertake research and updating, especially in the area of ecclesiology, that is, the theology of the Church and its canon law. It is eleven years since I was appointed bishop and, if the Lord spares me, there are more to come. So please pray for me during this time of renewal and refreshment.

I now come to the reason for this Letter. I begin with the Lord's words to Prophet Ezekiel in today's First Reading: *I have appointed you as sentry to the House of Israel. When you hear a word from my mouth, warn them in my name.*⁵ As the

Shepherd of the Diocese, the bishop is meant to be a sentry and a prophetic voice who speaks the truth and tells it as it is. So, when I look at the current state of our Diocese of Portsmouth, what do I see? Yes, I see so much that is positive: good and holy people, outstanding pastors, great parishes and schools, real efforts at outreach and massive potential. But I also see an enormous challenge.

You might think the challenge is about numbers, and in a sense, it is. Over the last 50 years, we have lost 55% of our Mass-going Catholics, and this, in spite of much immigration.⁶ More, despite the generous financial commitment of some, 20 of our 87 parishes run at a deficit, with little or no reserves. Again, there are large numbers of Catholic children in our schools, but why do we not see them in church? Why is it we have so few converts? And why is it there are not many mission-initiatives across the Diocese? To ask again: if your parish closed would anyone who is not a member notice the difference?⁷

This week, after two years of consultation, we publish the final version of our ten-year mission plan.⁸ Do make sure you download a copy.⁹ It is called *You Will be My Witnesses* based on Jesus's words at the end of His ministry when the Holy Spirit inaugurated the mission of the Church.¹⁰ Jesus never promised large numbers nor that He would fill churches. But He did ask us to be holy, to be His ambassadors, to model our lives, attitudes and actions on Him so as to go out and make disciples of others.¹¹ In the words of a hymn popular in the 1970s: "Go in my name and because you believe, others will know that I live."¹²

My brothers and sisters, this is the issue. It's easy to change the structures, and structural change is one part of the plan. But *You Will be My Witnesses* is about the hardest change of all: changing ourselves. It's about deepening and renewing our personal faith so that the Person of Christ is truly at the centre of our lives. It's about making our parish and school communities more missionary, more outward-facing, more focused on service of the needy. If this to happen, we need to start with ourselves. We need to begin by acknowledging that I could be holier. We need to repent and espouse renewal, rather than blaming others, or constantly complaining or saying "We have always done it this way."¹³ This is why I keep urging everyone to adopt the Six Holy Habits of:

- Attending Mass on Sunday;
- Spending five minutes a day in prayer;
- Keeping Friday as a day of penance;
- paying a visit once a fortnight to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament;
- Going to confession once a month or so; and
- Joining a small group for formation, prayer and fellowship.¹⁴

In today's Gospel, Jesus says: *Where two or three meet in my name I shall be there with them.*¹⁵ The presence and action of Jesus is visible on every page of *You Will be My Witnesses*. I thank you all for your invaluable feedback. We now have an exciting plan. We have a vision. We have a mission. *You Will be My Witnesses* is an inspiring strategy of hope for the Diocese to carry us over the next ten years and beyond. With the help of God's grace, let us turn the ship.

Heed again today's Psalm: *O that today you would listen to his voice! Harden not your hearts.*¹⁶ We live in a society in which many deny God or feel they have no need of Him. Yet others are seeking Him, which is why Jesus told us: "You will be my witnesses."¹⁷ We will not be witnesses unless we change and become holy. We need to be women and men of prayer. We need to deepen and renew

our faith, so that others may not stumble in the dark, but find the Way. I invite you to download the mission-plan and to put it into practice. In this Mass, let us thank God for giving us this plan. Let us ask the Lord Jesus to help our parishes and schools, clergy and laity to enact it. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to give us the grace to change and may the prayers of Mary Immaculate and St. Edmund help to bring us all closer to Jesus Christ through His Church.

In Corde Iesu,
+ Philip
Bishop of Portsmouth

¹ Mt 18: 15-20

² For Education Sunday and for resources, see <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/education-sunday/> (September 2023). Education Sunday is usually kept in early September, just after the new academic year starts. The theme for 2023 is “The armour of light”, taken from Ephesians 1:17-18.

³ “This Synod is intended as a Synodal Process. The aim of this synodal process is not to provide a temporary or one-time experience of synodality, but rather to provide an opportunity for the entire People of God to discern together how to move forward on the path towards being a more synodal Church in the long-term. A basic question prompts and guides us: How does this journeying together allow the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to Her; and what steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church?” See <https://www.synod.va/en.html> (September 2023)

⁴ Pope Francis said: “I am well aware that speaking of a ‘Synod on Synodality’ may seem something abstruse, self-referential, excessively technical, and of little interest to the general public, but what has happened over the past year, which will continue with the assembly next October and then with the second stage of Synod 2024, is something truly important for the Church.” See *National Catholic Register* (26th August 2023) ‘Pope Francis: Synod on Synodality ‘Truly Important’ Despite Being ‘of Little Interest to the General Public’ <https://www.ncregister.com/> (September 2023)

⁵ Ez 33: 7-9.

⁶ See the draft version of this plan *You Will be My Witnesses* 16-19 on the diocesan website (September 2023)

⁷ See J. Mallon *Divine Renovation Beyond the Parish* (Frederick Me, The Word Among Us Press: 2020) 35

⁸ The development of a long-term plan is a major undertaking for any organization. In the Diocese of Portsmouth, we have spent the last two years reflecting and sharing fears, hopes and dreams for our future. Our survey, *A Thousand Voices* (2021), the *Pastoral Area Reviews* (2021), and the *Synod* (2022) set the context and direction for the Mission Plan. The draft Plan was published in July 2022 and resulted in a wide diversity of opinion throughout the feedback process. Following the publication of the first draft, I heard the call for more detail about how the vision and priorities would be achieved. Feedback was also received about the proposed parish boundaries and these changes have been reflected in the finalised version. The time that people have taken to participate in this process is testimony to the desire to see the Church fulfil Her mission in our time. At the same time, a strategy for schools *That they May Have Life* has also been developed in collaboration with our school leaders, to reflect the importance of our Catholic schools in the life of the Diocese and the part they play in the formation of mission-focused communities, as well as addressing some of the challenges and opportunities for Catholic education. Of course, the publication of any plan is only the first step: we now need prayer and commitment. To realise our hopes and aspirations for a vibrant and revitalised church will require great effort, courage, generosity and above everything else, much prayer.

⁹ You can download a copy from the Diocesan website: <https://www.portsmouthdiocese.org.uk/our-mission/planning/ten-year-plan/> (September 2023)

¹⁰ Acts 1: 8. Cf. Mt 28: 19-20, Mk 16: 16-18 and Lk 24: 47-48

¹¹ See Lev 11: 44 *et passim*, Mt 10: 1-42 and 2 Cor 5: 20

¹² Carol Sue Owens *God Forgave my Sin* Bud John Songs, EMI Christian Music Publishing (1972)

¹³ There is a real risk of “complacency, the attitude that says: “We have always done it this way” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 33) and it is better not to change. That expression – “We have always done it that way” – is poison for the life of the Church. Those who think this way, perhaps without even realising it, make the mistake of not taking seriously the times in which we are living. The danger, in the end, is to apply old solutions to new problems. A patch of rough cloth that ends up creating a worse tear (cf. Mt9:16).” Pope Francis *Address Of His Holiness Pope Francis For The Opening Of The Synod (Saturday, 9 October 2022)*: www.vatican.va (September 2023)

¹⁴ 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 (September 2023)

¹⁵ Mt 18: 20

¹⁶ Ps 94: 8

¹⁷ Clearly the issue here is the cultural context in which we find ourselves and finding the 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> (September 2023)