



PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP
 appointed to be read
 in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth
 on Sunday 8th December 2024, the Second Sunday of Advent.

HOPE

Dear Friends in Christ,

I write to you about something that in these difficult times we need very much. It is one of the higher gifts from God that we should pray for¹ and it is the central theme of this magical season of Advent leading up to Christmas. I mean: hope. By hope, I don't just mean optimism, wishful thinking, being positive. Christian hope is much more thrilling. Hope is that joyful trust that at any moment now, in answer to our prayers, God will act. He will act with power. He will act to cause a change. He will come into the dark areas of our world and our lives to renew things² and one day He will bring us to the happiness of heaven.³ This is the message of St. John the Baptist in today's Liturgy: "Every valley shall be filled – the crooked shall become straight - all flesh shall see the salvation of God."⁴

Next year, 2025, Pope Francis has declared to be a Year of Jubilee, a Holy Year.⁵ The theme for the Holy Year is 'Pilgrims of Hope'. Hope, Francis says, is badly needed in our times with its suffering, wars and climate threats.⁶ Holy Years occur every 25 years. A Holy Year is meant to be 'holy,' that is, a time of prayer, repentance and practical charity. The Pope is inviting us to pray for a renewal of hope and to re-establish in joy a right relationship with God, with one another and with creation. He wants us to go on pilgrimage,⁷ either to Rome – the Diocese will do this in the summer for the Jubilee of Youth – or to one of the six pilgrimage shrines we are establishing across the Diocese.⁸ There we can go to Confession, receive Holy Communion and gain the Jubilee Indulgence.⁹ Please look at the Holy Year page on the diocesan website for more details.¹⁰ Over Christmas, why not list the intentions you would like to ask God for in the Holy Year? Why not learn an Act of Hope from your prayer book and pray it every day?¹¹ Why not plan to make a pilgrimage individually, as a family or as a group?

You may remember that last year, in the light of our ten-year mission plan *You Will be My Witnesses*, I asked everyone to adopt Six Holy Habits:

- To attend Mass on Sundays;
- To spend five minutes a day in prayer, using the Gospel of the day;
- To keep Friday as a day of penance and charity;
- To pay a visit once a fortnight to Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament;
- To celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation once a month or so; and
- To join a small group for formation, prayer and fellowship.¹²

The Six Holy Habits are about taking our faith seriously and putting the Person of Jesus Christ at the centre of our lives. One of these Habits is closely related to the theme of Hope and the Holy Year: namely, paying a visit to Jesus in church, in the tabernacle, in the Blessed Sacrament.¹³

When I was a child, my dad taught me a habit I have never lost. When he came in from work, we would often go out in the car for a short ride but always, on the way back, call into church to say a prayer. I started doing that with some of my friends when we went on bike trips. It was there in the dark and silence of the church, with the red sanctuary lamp flickering in the distance, that I gradually came to know the Lord and develop a personal friendship with Him. Whatever was going on in life, good or bad, I knew He was there and that He was with me. He was listening to my prayers, and He was filling me with joyful hope.¹⁴

Pope Francis in his recent Encyclical Letter on the Sacred Heart *Dilexit nos*, mentions how St. John Henry Newman, a distinguished intellectual, recognised that his deepest encounter with himself and with the Lord came not from his reading or studies, but from his prayerful dialogue, heart to heart, *cor ad cor*, with Christ, present and alive, in the Holy Eucharist.¹⁵ It was in the Eucharist that Newman encountered the living Heart of Jesus, Who sets us free, Who gives meaning to every moment of our lives, and Who bestows on us peace and joy. He then cites a beautiful prayer of Newman that begins: "O most Sacred, most loving Heart of Jesus, Thou art concealed in the Holy Eucharist, and Thou beatest for us still... I worship Thee with all my best love and awe, with my fervent affection, with my most subdued, most resolved will."¹⁶

Do look up this prayer. But my point is this: please adopt this Holy Habit of visiting church. Spend some time in silent prayer and conversation with Jesus, present and active in the Sacrament of the Altar.¹⁷ It will change your life. Many of our churches provide Eucharistic Adoration. As a work of evangelisation, would you be willing to become an adorer yourself, regularly offering an hour?

On this Second Sunday of Advent, St. John the Baptist tells us: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."¹⁸ This is a message of hope and joy for our times, when things can often seem bleak. So let us pray for the gift of hope. May we be pilgrims of hope. May we be so filled with hope and joy that we will bring many more people closer to Jesus Christ through His Church.

Thank you for listening. When it comes, may I wish you and your families a very happy Christmas and a holy New Year ahead.

In Corde Iesu,

+Philip

Bishop of Portsmouth

¹ “Earnestly desire the higher gifts” says St. Paul. See 1 Cor 12: 31 – 13: 13.

² “Hope is the confident expectation of divine blessing and the beatific vision of God”: See *Catechism of the Catholic Church. The CTS Definitive and Complete Edition* (London, Catholic Truth Society: 2016) 2090.

³ 1 Jn 3: 2

⁴ Lk 3: 5-6 (Gospel reading, citing Is 40: 4-5).

⁵ Pope Francis *Spes non confundit: Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025*: www.vatican.va (November 2024)

⁶ *Spes non confundit* 1.

⁷ *Spes non confundit* 5.

⁸ The shrine churches will be: St. John’s Cathedral Portsmouth, St. James’s Reading, Sacred Heart Bournemouth, St. Edmund’s Southampton, St. Thomas’s in St. Helier, Jersey and St. Joseph’s in St. Peter Port, Guernsey.

⁹ In the Bull of Indiction, Pope Francis explains what indulgences are and their importance in our spiritual lives: “We know from personal experience, every sin ‘leaves its mark.’ Sin has consequences, not only outwardly in the effects of the wrong we do, but also inwardly, inasmuch as ‘every sin, even venial, entails an unhealthy attachment to creatures, which must be purified either here on earth, or after death, in the state called Purgatory.’ In our humanity, weak and attracted by evil, certain residual effects of sin remain. These are removed by the indulgence, always by the grace of Christ, who, as Saint Paul VI wrote, ‘is himself our “indulgence”’ (*Spes non confundit* 23).

¹⁰ See <https://portsmouthdiocese.org.uk/jubilee-year-2025/> (November 2024)

¹¹ Here is one from the *Catechism*: “O Lord God, I hope by your grace for the pardon of all my sins, and, after life here, to gain eternal happiness, because you have promised it, you who are infinitely powerful, faithful, kind and merciful. In this hope I intend to live and [in this hope I intend] to die. Amen.” See *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London, CTS: 2006) 192.

¹² 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 (November 2024)

¹³ Once again, I ask that all the churches of our Diocese of Portsmouth be kept open, at least during daylight, for people to visit them and pray. Listen to what Pope Francis says about this: “The nature of the Church emerges from the Book of Acts, it is not a fortress, but a tent capable of enlarging its space (cf. Is 54:2) so that all can enter. The Church is ‘outgoing’ or it is not Church, it is either on the path, enlarging itself always, or is not Church. ‘It is a Church with its doors open’ (*Evangelii Gaudium* 46), always with the doors open. When I see some little church here, in this city, or when I see it in another diocese where I go, with its doors closed, that’s a bad sign. Churches must always have their doors open because this is a symbol of what a church is: always open. The Church is called to always be the open house of the Father. So that, if someone wants to follow a movement of the Spirit and approaches looking for God, they will not find themselves coming face to face with the coldness of a closed door (*Evangelii Gaudium* 47)” Francis *General Audience, St Peter’s Square Catechesis on the Acts of the Apostles (3rd October 2019)*: online at <https://www.popefrancishomilies.com/open-door-church> (November 2024)

¹⁴ “Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ’s promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit” *Catechism* 1817. In *Spes non confundit*, Francis says “Christian hope does not deceive or disappoint because it is grounded in the certainty that nothing and no one may ever separate us from God’s love” (3).

¹⁵ Pope Francis *Dilexit nos On the Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ* (London, CTS: 2024).

¹⁶ *Dilexit nos* 25. The reference is to J. H. Newman *Meditations and Devotions* (London, Longmans, Green and Co.: 1953) 326.

¹⁷ “The worship of the Eucharist outside of the Mass is of inestimable value for the life of the Church. This worship is strictly linked to the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. The presence of Christ under the sacred species reserved after Mass — a presence which lasts as long as the species of bread and of wine remain — derives from the celebration of the sacrifice and is directed toward communion, both sacramental and spiritual. It is the responsibility of pastors to encourage, also by their personal witness, the practice of eucharistic adoration, and exposition of the Blessed Sacrament in particular, as well as prayer of adoration before Christ present under the eucharistic species. It is pleasant to spend time with Him, to lie close to His breast like the Beloved Disciple (cf. Jn 13:25) and to feel the infinite love present in His heart. If in our time Christians must be distinguished above all by the “art of prayer”, how can we not feel a renewed need to spend time in spiritual converse, in silent adoration, in heartfelt love before Christ present in the Most Holy Sacrament? How often, dear brother and sisters, have I experienced this, and drawn from it strength, consolation and support!” John Paul II *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (London, CTS: 2003) 25.

¹⁸ Lk 3: 4