



PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP
 appointed to be read
 in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth
 on 2nd March 2025, the Eighth Sunday of the Year.

BELONGING

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This coming Wednesday we begin the season of Lent, a time of spiritual renewal, a *favourable time* St. Paul says, *the day of salvation*.¹ The Mass on Ash Wednesday begins with a dramatic prayer: *Grant, O Lord, that we may begin with holy fasting this campaign of Christian service, so that, as we take up battle against spiritual evils, we may be armed with weapons of self-restraint*.² Lent is an annual spiritual campaign, a time of change and conversion, a time to do battle against evil in ourselves and in others, and the weapons we deploy are threefold: prayer, self-denial and charity. I will say more about this in a moment.

For you will remember that I have asked everyone in the diocese, clergy, religious and laity, to adopt and to keep Six Holy Habits, that is:

- To attend Mass every Sunday;
- 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.³

These Six Holy Habits are about taking our faith seriously and putting the Person of Jesus Christ at the centre of our lives. This is what the Holy Year is all about.

One Habit that is a real help is the last one: belonging to a small Catholic group or association for formation, prayer and fellowship. Christianity is not about me and God; it's also about 'we' and God. Just as God Himself is a communion of Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so too we are made in His image.⁴ We are built to be social, just as our Creator said: "It is not good for the man to be alone; so I will make him a helper fit for him."⁵ As disciples of Christ, we belong to His

Body, the Church. We are called to be in relationship with like-minded people and thus to live in communion with the Lord in mission.

I want therefore to encourage everyone - priests, deacons and laity, young and old - to belong to a Catholic club, society, movement or organisation – whatever you fancy, depending on your temperament and interests. It might be a group whose focus is spiritual or practical or social. It could be a new group or an old one. It might be a network or an association, such as the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the Catenians, the Mini-Vinnies, a cell group, a bible study, a CAFOD circle, Jesus Caritas, a foodbank provider, an evangelisation team, a Holy Souls group,⁶ a guild, a Third Order, a men's group, a women's group, a youth group. Small groups, whether for outreach or 'in-reach,' are places where we build up new friendships. Yet they are also places where we can build up our faith, with a real sense of belonging to Christ's Body, the Church. As Jesus said: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."⁷ Every meeting should begin with prayer and a passage to discuss from the Bible, the *Catechism* or the Church's teaching. There also needs to be time to support one another, to listen to what God is doing in their lives, and to share my own story.

I belong to a priests' support group. I've been part of it now for over thirty years. There are seven priests in it from different dioceses and we meet six times a year. I find it a huge support to know that brother priests are praying for me. Some of the priests in the group are utterly hilarious, and so our meetings are always highly entertaining! We pray together; we discuss matters to do with our pastoral ministry, and we share a meal. Sometimes we have a good argument.⁸ In today's lonely, isolating, busy world, small groups like this answer a real need. But belonging to a Catholic faith-based group is always about so much more. It's about meeting and serving Christ in one another.

This Lent I want to ask you to think about how you belong to Christ's Church, what it means to be a member and how you can support the mission. Don't be a passive receiver; be a proactive giver! Christ has called us into His Church; He has enriched us with gifts; He wants us to be co-responsible, each playing our part.⁹ I know you are busy, with lots to do, so little time, the pressure of work, maybe raising a family. Yet even the sick and the housebound have a crucial contribution to make. In any case, these days it is so easy to join things virtually or online, such as *The Living Rosary*.¹⁰ So I invite you to join a small group for formation, prayer and fellowship. Presently, Caritas Diocese of Portsmouth is systematically analysing our Pastoral Areas in order to identify how each parish might better serve its local community. This involves collating data on poverty, homelessness, housing, ageing, loneliness, domestic abuse, youth, migrants, refugees and modern slavery, and proposing ideas about how we might respond. Might the report from Caritas about your parish and your area inspire you to join together with others to do something to help?

No good tree bears bad fruit Jesus says in today's Gospel *nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit*.¹¹ As we begin the season of Lent, let us focus ourselves on the three pillars of prayer, self-denial and charity. May they reveal to us what we need to change in our lives and what we need to strengthen. Every *tree is known by its fruit* Jesus adds. So let us approach this Lenten season not just to profit ourselves but to work out how best we can help and support one another. Indeed, during this season, may the Blessed Virgin Mary strengthen our

communion with Her Son. May She guide us along the right paths and give us a deeper sense of belonging to one another in Christ's Body the Church.

Thank you for listening.

In Corde Iesu
+ Philip
Bishop of Portsmouth

¹ 2 Corinthians 6: 2

² *The Roman Missal. English Translation according to the Third Typical Edition* (London, CTS: 2010) 233

³ 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
(February 2025)

⁴ “For by his innermost nature, man is a social being and unless he relates himself to others, he can neither live nor develop his potential.” Second Vatican Council *Gaudium et Spes, The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* 12 in W. M. Abbott ed. *The Documents of Vatican II* (London, Geoffrey Chapman: 1966) 211. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London, CTS: 1999/2016) 1878-1879.

⁵ See Gen 2: 4-25

⁶ This prayer for the holy souls is promoted from the Shrine of Our Lady of Montligeon in Normandy and which is now spreading in our Diocese of Portsmouth. See <https://montligeon.org/en/the-shrine-of-our-lady-of-montligeon/> (February 2025)

⁷ Mt 18: 20

⁸ “Iron sharpens iron and one man sharpens another” (Prov 27: 17)

⁹ 1 Cor 12: 12-30

¹⁰ The Living Rosary Association was founded on 8th December 1826 by Pauline Marie Jaricot in Lyon. For more, see <https://www.philomena.org> (February 2025)

¹¹ Lk 6: 43