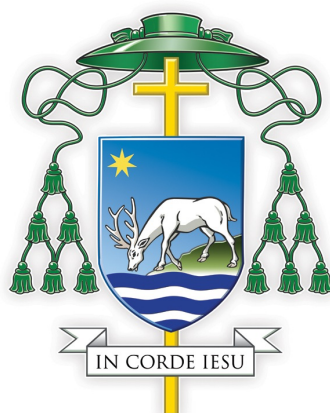




PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP
appointed to be read
in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth
on 28th December 2025, the Feast of the Holy Family

THE HOLY YEAR CLOSSES TODAY

Dear Followers of Christ,

I have just three thoughts to put before you today.

First, I want to wish you a blessed Christmas! The Christmas message is about hope: that God the Son, Who once took flesh in Bethlehem and Who one day will come again, also, as St. Bernard teaches, comes to us today.¹ Through His Church, Jesus is with us and this gives us real hope. Hope is not wishful thinking, optimism or staying positive. Christian hope is a gift from God, a theological virtue founded on Christ and fashioned by the Holy Spirit.² The Spirit gives us the hope of heaven, of being united forever with Christ and the Father in the communion of the saints. He also gives us a profound desire for happiness that sustains us through misfortune.³ Not least, the Spirit rouses within us an expectation that at any moment now, in answer to prayer, God will act with power to change things. As we enter the New Year 2026, may the Holy Spirit renew us with deeper Christian hope. We live under the shadow of death in a world of fear, a world of threats and misfortune, a world of war, worry and anxiety. Yet as St. Ignatius of Loyola once said: "Pray as if everything depended on God. Work as if it all depends on you."⁴ So in 2026, let us let go of cynicism and pessimism, and instead be men and women of hope, who live in the prayerful expectation that God will act - and act now.

Secondly, last time I wrote to you, it was about priestly vocations. Our Diocese is extremely short of priests.⁵ I implore every one of you to pray earnestly for more vocations.⁶ This year, ten priests have died, yet only one was ordained, and this could be the first year ever we will not be sending any students to seminary.⁷ Ask yourself: When was the last time your parish produced a priest?

This is why I am reaching out personally to any man in the Diocese who may be wondering whether God is calling him to be a priest. Indeed, I invite any man not married, aged 17 or older, who would like to know more about being a priest, to contact me. Scan the QR code. I want to invite you to meet me at the Cathedral next Sunday 4th January at 3 o'clock, for Vespers followed by a short reception. With hope in the Lord, let us pray that many will respond.

And thirdly, the Jubilee Year officially comes to a close today. Let us thank God for the graces and blessings we have received during this Holy Year 2025. I know some of you this year have been on pilgrimage to Rome or to one of the diocesan shrine churches.⁸ When he established the Holy Year, Pope Francis chose the theme 'Pilgrims of Hope'.⁹ Hope, he said, is badly needed in our day with all its suffering, injustice, wars and climate threats.¹⁰ He wanted us to pray for a renewal of hope and the restoration of right relationships with God, with one another and with creation. At the close of this Year, may we be pilgrims of hope, bringing people closer to Jesus Christ through His Church. On all our behalf, I thank Fr. Ansel D'Mello for guiding us so well through the Year.

"Blessed are all who fear the Lord and walk in his ways," we sang in the Psalm.¹¹ Today's Feast of the Holy Family of Jesus Mary and Joseph is an annual day of prayer in our Diocese for children and vulnerable adults, for the victims of abuse and for all who work to make our churches safe. Just as Mary and Joseph created a safe home-environment for Jesus, so too we pray that the Church in all her contexts will be a safe haven for all. In our prayers today, let us pray for our diocesan Safeguarding team, for the Safeguarding Committee and for all our Parish Safeguarding Ministers. Meanwhile, I wish you a blessed New Year ahead. With the support of Our Lady and St. Joseph, St. Edmund and St. Pier Giorgio, may the good Lord grant us an answer to all our prayers.

In Corde Iesu
+ Philip
Bishop of Portsmouth.

¹ "We know that there are three comings of the Lord. The third lies between the other two. It is invisible, while the other two are visible. In the first coming He was seen on earth, dwelling among men In the final coming all flesh will see the salvation of our God, and they will look on Him whom they pierced. The intermediate coming is a hidden one; in it only the elect see the Lord within their own selves, and they are saved. ... In case someone should think that what we say about this middle coming is sheer invention, listen to what Our Lord Himself says: 'If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him' St. Bernard of Clairvaux (*Sermo 5, In Adventu Domini*, 1-3: *Opera Omnia*, Edit. Cisterc. 4 [1966], 188-190).

² "Faith, hope and charity too, are genuine powers, bestowed by God ..." YOUCAT 306 (cf. 308)

³ "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 of the Catholic Church* 1817.

⁴ This saying is attributed to St. Ignatius of Loyola: see James P. M. Walsh 'Work as if Everything Depends on— Who?' *The Way Supplement* 70 (Spring 1991), 125–36. Walsh thinks the authentic Ignatian message was, in effect, "Pray as if everything depends on you" (that is, pray desperately, trust God fervently), and "Work as if everything depends on God" (that is, work calmly and with detachment).

⁵ I always say that first and foremost in the Diocese of Portsmouth we are short of people, that is, 'can-do' laity on fire with the love of Christ, who are willing to take responsibility and give a lead, to share their time, talent and treasure, in order to make the Church 'be' what she is meant to be.

⁶ Mt 9: 36-38

⁷ “Without ministerial priests, there would be no Eucharist, no Mass. It is no exaggeration to say that, without priests to celebrate Mass, eventually this local Church, which is the Diocese of Portsmouth, would cease to exist. It would become like the places in North Africa which are now used as titular sees for auxiliary bishops” Canon James McAuley *Homily at the Mass for Deceased Clergy* 20th November 2025, in *Portsmouth Diocese Enews Issue* 512

⁸ The shrine churches were 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 Pope Francis *Spes non confundit: Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025*: www.vatican.va (December 2025)

¹⁰ *Spes non confundit* 1.

¹¹ Psalm 128: 1