



PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP
 appointed to be read
 in all churches and chapels of the Diocese of Portsmouth
 on 14th May 2017, the Fifth Sunday of Eastertide.

GOD IS CALLING YOU

Dear Friends of Jesus,

"You are a chosen race," St. Peter said in the Second Reading, "a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light."¹

My brothers and sisters, you and I are different - or at least we are meant to be. Jesus has chosen us to be His disciples within His Body the Church. Yes, we were born at a particular time and place, but better, we have been re-born in Baptism and given the most precious gift of all, faith.² To be a disciple of Christ is awesome! Jesus unites us with Himself. He saves us from sin, suffering and death; He fills us with the love of the Blessed Trinity; He opens for us the way to Paradise.³ To be a disciple means to be a student, a listener, an apprentice learning from the Master, Who "went about doing good."⁴ This is why Jesus makes us His missionary disciples. He wants us to go out, sharing our faith with family, friends and all we meet. More, He wants us to be a creative minority in society, to transform the world. Drawing strength from Him in the Eucharist, He wants us to be agents of change, building a Kingdom of justice, truth and peace, serving the poor and needy.⁵ Jesus in the Gospels uses various images for this. We are meant to be salt, light, leaven in the dough, lamps on lampstands, a city on the hilltop, and so on.⁶

Let's return to this in a moment. For last Sunday was Good Shepherd Sunday, a world day of prayer for vocations.⁷ We were asked to pray for vocations to all states of life and ministry within the Church, especially to the diaconate and priesthood. The word vocation, from Latin *vocare* 'to call,' reminds us that you and I have been called and gifted. We have been chosen to be Christ's missionary disciples but within a specific state of life. For many, this will be

matrimony, being a husband or wife, father or mother. For some, it is the single life. A few are called to religious community-life, and a few to celibacy, in imitation of Jesus Himself, serving the world and the Church.⁸ Besides such states of life, Christ calls us to specific ministries such as teaching, catechesis, prayer, pastoral care, administration, music, writing and so on. In today's First Reading, seven men were called to the diaconate.⁹ Every Christian, each one of us, is called to something: the Church carries no passengers. As Blessed John Henry Newman once said, God created us for a "definite purpose"¹⁰ and one of our tasks is, by prayer and reflection, to discern what it is.

There are a couple of things I want to ask you. First, to make prayer for vocations, especially to the priesthood, a central priority. In our Diocese, God is calling men to serve Him as priests. How are you helping them to hear His call? Are you praying for them, encouraging them, supporting them? When was the last time your parish, your school, your family produced a priest? We are short of priests, but priests do not come out of thin air. They come from prayer and fasting. Please pray for more priests. Why not say the Rosary for this intention? Or offer up your Friday abstinence? Or if you watch a football match, ask God to call one of the players or one of the fans?

Secondly, I want to encourage each person to ask: What is God asking of me? We are short of priests. But even more our Diocese is short of people, people of passion, 'can-do' Catholics who really want the Church to *be* what she is meant to be. Our parish ministries, Catholic schools, Evangelisation Strategy Teams and Diocesan Framework function only thanks to generous and willing volunteers. Maybe God is calling you to contribute to one of these vital parts of diocesan life? Why not have a word with your parish priest? Or why not try the *Called and Gifted* programme?¹¹ It includes a confidential one-to-one interview with a specialist about your relationship with God, your vocation in life and the gifts the Holy Spirit has given you for mission and service. *Called and Gifted* has already helped many hundreds of laity across the Diocese. Why not sign up yourself? It will change your life.

Let me return to discipleship. Britain is preparing for a General Election and as Catholics we have a crucial contribution to make to this democratic process. Here are ten key questions to think about. You could use them to evaluate a manifesto, or you could put them to a prospective parliamentary candidate.

First, and foremost, how far will this or that candidate protect the sacred dignity of each human life from conception to natural death, opposing moves to liberalise the abortion laws, to extend embryo experimentation and to legalise assisted suicide and euthanasia?¹²

How will they strengthen Britain's Christian patrimony, its history, classics and values, whilst curbing fundamentalism in its various forms, scientific and religious, and promoting a fruitful dialogue between faith and reason?¹³

How will they support families, traditional family life and family values?¹⁴

How will they correlate freedom and responsibility? How will they build up community, foster philanthropy and support charity? How will they help the

homeless?¹⁵ How will they improve the care of the mentally ill?¹⁶ How will they give greater support to the lowest earners, to the sick, to the disabled, to the dying? How will they care better for the environment, promoting an 'integral ecology' with a simpler life-style?¹⁷

And tenthly, how will they foster peace, justice and development abroad, whilst encouraging our Government to stand up for Christians who are being persecuted in such places as Syria and Egypt?

In today's Gospel, Jesus said: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God still and trust in me."¹⁸ We believe that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life. He calls each one of us to discern our vocation and to play our part. As we approach the General Election, let us pray for our country. May the prayers of Mary Immaculate, St. Edmund of Abingdon and Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, patron of our youth, help us to draw fresh vigour from Jesus, Whose Eucharistic Heart is the "House of God and the Gate of Heaven."¹⁹

Thank you for listening – and don't forget to download to your tablet or smart-phone the new Diocesan App!

With my prayers and best wishes

+ Philip

Bishop of Portsmouth

¹ 1 Peter 2: 8-9.

² "Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit (*vitae spiritualis ianua*) and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission" *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [henceforth CCC] 1213.

³ See CCC 1262-1274.

⁴ Acts 10: 38. "He always showed compassion for children and for the poor, for the sick and for sinners, and he became a neighbour to the oppressed and the afflicted. By word and deed he announced to the world that you are our Father and that you care for all your sons and daughters" *Eucharistic Prayer for Special Needs IV: Jesus Who went about Doing Good*.

⁵ Bl. Pier Giorgio Frassati puts it neatly: "Jesus comes to me every day in Holy Communion and I repay Him in my own small way by visiting the poor."

⁶ See Mt 5: 13-16 and 13: 33.

⁷ 2017 marks the 54th Anniversary of the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. The purpose of the World Day of Prayer for Vocations is to fulfil the Lord's instruction to "ask the Lord of the harvest to send labourers into his harvest" (Mt 9:38; Lk 10:2).

⁸ See, for instance, CCC 1579 and CCC 2349.

⁹ Acts 6: 1-7.

¹⁰ "God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me, which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do His work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it if I do but keep His commandments. Therefore, I

will trust Him, whatever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him, in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him. If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me. Still, He knows what He is about.” *Meditations and Devotions of the Late Cardinal John Henry Newman* (London, Longman, Green and Co: 1911) 301.

¹¹ For more on this, see www.portsmouthdiocese.org.uk/calledandgifted/ (April 2017).

¹² This is the most fundamental question of all – the value of human life - and one we must continue to campaign about in our society. Cf. Pope Francis *Laudato Si* (www.vatican.va [April 2017]) 120.

¹³ This may seem like an abstract question, yet the world today faces two major ideologies that pose a great danger: fundamentalism (religion without reason) and secularism (reason without religion). Only a society solidly based on a fruitful, open dialogue between faith and reason, science and religion, can lead to authentic human flourishing: see Benedict XVI *Address to the Representatives of British Society (Westminster Hall, 2010)* - online at www.vatican.va (April 2017). Secularism is too flimsy a basis for British society and our values to endure. This is why there is an urgent need in both Catholic and state schools to ‘recover’ and promote the Christian patrimony.

¹⁴ The family as the domestic Church is central to Catholic social teaching and the wellbeing of society: see Pope Francis *Amoris Laetitia* - online at www.vatican.va (April 2017).

¹⁵ There has been of late a massive increase in homelessness and people sleeping rough. This is evident in Portsmouth city centre and throughout our diocese. The number of beggars is also at record levels. See “Number of rough sleepers in England rises for sixth successive year” *The Guardian* 25th January 2017 (www.theguardian.com/society/2017/jan/25/number-of-rough-sleepers-in-england-rises-for-sixth-successive-year [April 2017]).

¹⁶ Those suffering from mental illness frequently face discrimination: see G. Thornicroft *Shunned: Discrimination Against People with Mental Illness* (Oxford UP: 2006).

¹⁷ The term ‘integral ecology’ is used by Pope Francis. See Pope Francis *Laudato Si* Chapter Four.

¹⁸ John 14:1.

¹⁹ ‘*Cor Iesu, domus Dei et porta caeli, miserere nobis.*’ The *Litany of the Sacred Heart* is of French origin and was approved for use in public worship by Pope Leo XIII in 1899. Its 33 invocations, one for each year of the Lord’s life, is a synthesis of other litanies dating back to the 17C.