



Message from Bishop Philip: FOLLOWING UP THE YEAR OF MERCY

Dear Friends,

On 20th November 2016, the Solemnity of Christ the King, the Holy Father closed the Holy Door in Rome and officially brought to an end the Year of Mercy. In our Diocese of Portsmouth, we closed the Holy Year with celebrations in the Cathedral and in Abingdon, where I rededicated our Diocese to the patronage of St. Edmund.

Ever since in 2015 Pope Francis announced this Jubilee Year, the Year produced a huge popular response. Its aim was easy to grasp: that we experience afresh God's mercy for ourselves and then apply God's mercy to others, or more concretely, that we renew ourselves through the Sacrament of Confession and then enact spiritual and corporal works of mercy. The Holy Year was a time of renewal, with many rediscovering, after a long time away, the Sacrament of Reconciliation. And as our diocesan *Enews* attests, schools and parishes engaged enthusiastically in charitable works.

To mark the end of the Jubilee Year, Pope Francis has issued a short Apostolic Letter called *Misericordia et misera*.¹ I commend it to your reflection. In it, the Holy Father speaks of us experiencing personally God's mercy:

"We have celebrated an intense Jubilee Year in which we have received the grace of mercy in abundance. Like a gusting but wholesome wind, the Lord's goodness and mercy have been poured out upon the entire world. ... It has truly been like a new visitation of the Lord among us"
(*Misericordia et misera* n. 4).

He goes on to discuss how we might follow up the Year of Mercy, proposing various initiatives. Reflecting on our own situation in the Diocese of Portsmouth, I wish to underline the Pope's proposals and to make a few other suggestions for you to consider. The Jubilee Year has been too important a means of renewal to let it fade into a mere memory. Three points.

First, I want to encourage everyone in our Diocese, clergy and people, to receive regularly the Sacrament of Reconciliation, at least once a month. Please let this Sacrament "regain its central place in the Christian life."² Regular Confession, even of 'venial' sins or everyday faults,³ is too precious an opportunity to miss, a spiritual health-check, an encounter with Jesus, a time to experience personally God's mercy, a means of real renewal. It's worth reflecting that although the Door of Mercy was closed to mark the end the Holy Year, there is a door of God's mercy that is ever open: the door of the confessional.

In *Misericordia et misera* Pope Francis speaks about how priests should prepare themselves for this ministry. Priests must be welcoming to all as "witnesses of fatherly tenderness whatever the gravity of the sin involved, attentive in helping penitents to reflect on the wrong they have done, clear in presenting moral principles, willing to walk patiently beside the faithful on their penitential journey, far-sighted in discerning individual cases and generous in dispensing God's forgiveness" (n. 10).

I ask all our priests and parishes to review their Confession times. In this early 21st century, ask yourself: Is Saturday really the best day? If we wish to help renew the spiritual life of our people, could we not consider some alternative and more convenient times? For instance, I know that some parishes even offer Confessions for half an hour before Sunday Mass. Although this means that much of the Mass preparation has to be done in advance, people value the opportunity given.

I also want to encourage the clergy of our Pastoral Areas to reflect on the Pope's call for "24 Hours for the Lord" around the Fourth Sunday of Lent.⁴ During the Jubilee Year in many parts of the Diocese this was a resounding success. This coming Lent, if literally twenty-four hours is not possible, might one church in the area be designated for twelve hours, with a rota of priests?

Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall have mercy shown them" (Mt 5: 7). Putting into practice the mercy of God, received in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, requires us to be 'proactive,' especially in reaching out to others where there has been offence or division. I am thinking here especially of grievances, resentments and fallings-out in our families or among formerly close friends: situations that can sometimes last for years. I wonder if this Advent, Christmas and New Year, a season of goodwill when God does the same for us, you might make a gesture of reaching out in loving mercy?

Secondly, I wish to suggest some liturgical pointers that could help continue the celebration of God's loving mercy. The Holy Father underlines a love and knowledge of Scripture through *lectio divina* as a means of helping everyone experience God's mercy and inspiring them to put mercy into action. This is why each year we could make more of Bible Sunday,⁵ usually the Second Sunday of Advent. It is an opportunity to give thanks for the gift of the Bible, and to deepen engagement with the Scriptures. Might it be good around Bible Sunday to organize a day of renewal and training for Readers? Or to put on an evening class on *lectio divina*?

Again, I would like us to make something of the Holy Father's designation of the Thirty-Third Sunday of the Year as "World Day of the Poor." It should be "a day to help communities and each of the baptized to reflect on how poverty is at the very heart of the Gospel and that, as long as Lazarus lies at the door of our homes (cf. Lk 16:19-21), there can be no justice or social peace" (n. 21).

People will have their own ideas. But in the Diocese of Portsmouth, let us make it a special Day of Prayer and Action for the poor, especially for migrants and refugees. Some of our diocesan agencies are able to assist with this: the Migrant-Refugee Working Group, the Charities Outreach team, and the Justice, Peace and Social Responsibility team.

We celebrate the mercy of God in every Mass: "You came in mercy to the aid of all so that those who seek might find You."⁶ This theme is especially prominent in the Fourth Eucharistic Prayer, which is a "hymn to God's mercy."⁷ I wonder if our priests, therefore, might consider using more frequently Eucharistic Prayer Four, with its Preface, whenever permitted?

And thirdly, I encourage parishes and schools to continue expressing God's mercy through the seven corporal and the seven spiritual works of mercy.⁸ The corporal works comprise feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, burying the dead, visiting those in prison, and above all, giving alms to the poor. The spiritual works are: giving instruction, advising the doubtful, comforting the sorrowful, admonishing sinners, praying for others, bearing wrongs patiently, and forgiving those who insult us. To all these works, let us add: care of animals and creation, and the defence and support of human life from conception to natural death. During the Jubilee Year, many undertook corporal works of mercy. Going forward, it would be good to ensure that the spiritual works are not overlooked.

One great, indeed blessed fruit from the Holy Year has been the inauguration of *Caritas Diocese of Portsmouth*. I thank all those who have been working so hard on this project. In our weekly *Enews* it has been heartening to read of all the projects *Caritas* has been enabling in our communities. As Catholics in this country, we have often been introverted, focused on building up our own community, seeing schools and parishes as almost ends in themselves. Yet as Christ's missionary disciples we are not here to build community! We are here to build *communion*. Our parishes are not members-only clubs. We are here to proclaim the Gospel. We are here to bring Good News to the poor and needy, to those on the margins, to the spiritually adrift. This is why I encourage everyone, clergy and laity, to look outwards, to be missionary, to identify needs, to consult with *Caritas* and to devise manageable projects that bring God's mercy to the most needy.

As the Holy Father said in his encyclical letter *Laudato Si*, we know that Nature itself, burdened and laid waste, is today "among the most abandoned and maltreated of the poor," crying out because of the harm inflicted on it through humanity's irresponsible use of its God-given goods.⁹ This is why as a practical expression of mercy, I wonder if, in addition to Fridays, when we abstain from meat as an act of penance in honour of the Lord's Passion, we might make some Fridays days of fasting, or designate an additional meatless

weekday – for instance Tuesdays? – as an act of gratitude in honour of God our Creator?

In conclusion, I thank and congratulate everyone, clergy and people, for their magnificent response to the grace of God in the Holy Year. In the year ahead, let us keep before us the words of Psalm 135: *quoniam in aeternum misericordia eius* ('for His mercy endures for ever'). Here in our Diocese 'the harvest is rich but the labourers are few' (Luke 10: 2). Let us beg the Lord of the harvest to send us many labourers, that is, men and women more fully converted to Christ, completely at His service and dedicated to His mission.

Assuring you of my prayers and best wishes,

In Corde Iesu

+ Philip

Bishop of Portsmouth.

¹ Pope Francis *Misericordia et misera. Apostolic Letter at the Conclusion of the Extraordinary Jubilee Year* (20th November 2016): available online at www.vatican.va.

² *ibid.* n. 11

³ For the distinction between 'mortal' and 'venial' sins, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1455-1458 and *YOUCAT Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church* 316.

⁴ *ibid.* n. 11

⁵ *ibid.* n. 7

⁶ Eucharistic Prayer IV. This prayer is a "hymn to God

⁷ *Misericordia et misera* n. 5

⁸ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2447; cf. *YOUCAT Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church* 450-451.

⁹ See Pope Francis *Laudato Si. On Care of our Common Home* (London, CTS: 2015) n. 2